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**“A Little Bit of Paradise”: Women’s Search for Comfort in  
Late-Nineteenth Century Montana**

**By**

**Allison Badger**

B.A., Rocky Mountain College, 2001

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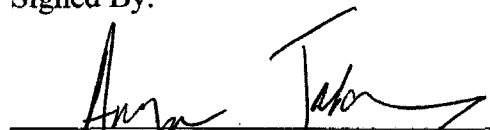
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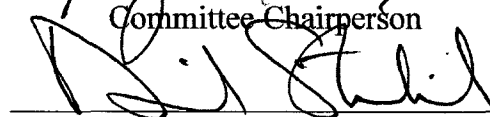
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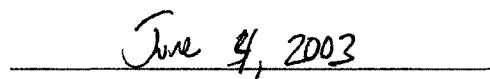
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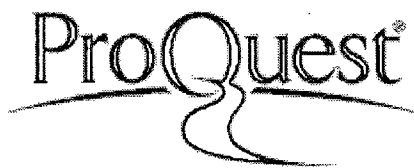


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## Abstract

Badger, Allison, M.A., May 2003

History

“A Little Bit of Paradise:” Women’s Search for Comfort in Nineteenth-Century Montana

Committee Advisor: Professor Anya Jabour



This thesis examines the coping strategies utilized by late-nineteenth century Montana women. As revealed in their personal letters, diaries and reminiscences, these settlers sought to recreate their former eastern and Midwestern homes through the use of stylish clothing and furnishings. By utilizing mail order catalogs, relatives, and personal ingenuity, they discovered ways to replicate environments that provided them with the emotional comfort missing from their Montana homes. Women needed to develop a coping mechanism because their previous lives had not prepared them for the circumstances they faced in nineteenth-century Montana. This mismatch between their emotional needs and reality led to the development of stress. Female settlers coped with this stress by recreating those living situations that could connect them to eastern family members and lifestyles both emotionally and physically.

While Turkish-style divans and cashmere riding habits sharply contrasted with the western environment, women justified this focus on material culture through the cult of domesticity. However, this western domestic ideology did not mimic the behaviors laid out by New England writers and clergy. Ignoring its submissive elements, Montana women embraced those facets that encouraged women to concentrate on their homes and appearances. These characteristics encouraged women to express their femininity, which they did by wearing stylish clothing and living in socially acceptable homes.

Montana women did not adopt one particular trend, but altered their looks as styles evolved. It was very important for them to remain in line with American material culture. For them, remaining fashionable signaled gentility. For example, donning masculine influenced clothing or using improvised furnishings indicated that a woman was not coping, and had failed to fulfill domesticity’s tenets.

Western domesticity allowed Montana women to continue operating in their feminine sphere and gave women the means to cope with their circumstances.

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## Introduction

Last winter, not having been to the dentist for several years, I found myself making up for lost time. Over the course of six weeks, I made five visits to see my dentist, Dr. Jones. During my numerous visits, Dr. Jones and I spent some time talking about my thesis. In the midst of one of our chats, he made the observation that I must be finding lots of Montana women who turned to whisky as a means of coping with the rugged conditions of their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Conversations such as this continued when I came in six months later for a checkup. Several dental assistants offered that it was not uncommon for prairie women to hang colored handkerchiefs on poles in front of their homes so they would know when the wind blew. One assistant, in particular, appeared to feel that female homesteaders often lost their sanity because they could not tell when the wind blew, unless they possessed some sort of visual cue. Although I was aware that observations such as these are common, I was shocked that it had not occurred to Dr. Jones and his staff that perhaps pioneer women did not go insane, but found ways to cope with the rigors of frontier life.

This paper that argues female Montana settlers used material culture--fashion and interior decorating--to create physically comfortable and emotionally healthy lives on the nineteenth-century frontier. While it may seem odd that women whose families' day-to-day survival depended on their efforts found the time and energy to decorate and dress in ways that met eastern standards regarding propriety. Yet, Montana women did squeeze

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to point out that despite Dr. Jones's obvious lack of knowledge concerning women and women's history, he is in fact, an excellent dentist.

the time and energy to do so into an already crowded day. My thesis will examine how closely Montana women paralleled eastern trends, as well the motives behind their efforts. My goal is to move perceptions of female pioneers past the broken woman stereotype, and present them instead as women who survived and even grew because of their experiences. Ultimately, this thesis is an attempt to demonstrate that Montana women coped with their circumstances in healthy and productive ways by turning to the cult of domesticity.

Old west historians such as Dee Brown, often depicted female settlers as little more “than a face hidden in a ragged sunbonnet. Often her bonnet was gay with color and ornamented with flowers; sometimes she wore French millinery, the latest styles from Paris.”<sup>2</sup> Although Brown’s characterization of western women as addicted to European high fashion represented an improvement over previous stereotypes, it was still inaccurate. Other erroneous portrayals include the “frightened, tearful woman wrenched from home and hearth and dragged off into the terrible west,” the mining camp prostitute with a heart of gold, or the “sturdy helpmate and civilizer of the frontier.” Prior to the 1970s and 1980s, historians presumed that the presence of a Gentle Tamer “curtailed male freedom and forced unwanted control upon men’s self-imposed rejection of civilized values.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, in moving past these views, am I creating a stereotype of my own-

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<sup>2</sup> Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 1-3. For more information on depictions of western women see also Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, “The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 49 (May 1980), 173-213 and Beverly J. Stoeltje, “‘A Helpmate for Man Indeed:’ The Image of the Frontier Woman,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 88 (January-March 1975), 25-41.



that of a woman unwilling to give up her eastern ways in favor of a more practical western lifestyle.

To avoid this problem I undertook a case-study approach rather than a systematic examination of all nineteenth-century Montana women. This methodology enabled me to make case-by-case judgments, and avoid sweeping generalizations. My conclusions regarding women's coping skills only apply to those women discussed in this paper. I am uncomfortable applying my domesticity argument to women whose experiences do not approximate those discussed here. My domesticity thesis may not apply to working-class women or women who engaged in masculine oriented tasks such as horse breaking.

My information regarding Montana women's reliance on domesticity as a coping mechanism came from the diaries, letters and reminiscences of late-nineteenth century female settlers. While other western historians have used the information revealed in these documents to describe women's clothing and decorating activities, they have not focused on the psychology of these actions. Rarely have historians described women's efforts to reproduce their eastern surroundings in the West.

However, as informative as these sources can be, they each contain their own set of limitations. Reminiscences, written years after the event, typically depict homesteading and ranching through rose-colored lenses. This source is often unreliable because authors forget details of the initial experience or they choose to delete or embellish certain events. During the nineteenth-century, pioneer reminiscences were a known literary form with a standard format and content, and "writers often added events which they had not

experienced but included because they were expected parts of the typical pioneer story.”<sup>4</sup>

In comparison to reminiscences, diaries were typically not written with an outside reader in mind. Those truly private diaries are “bare-bones works written primarily to keep records of receipts and expenditures, the weather, visits to and from neighbors, or public occurrences of both the institutional and sensational sort.” Women who kept diaries usually wrote in a very terse manner, mentioning few specific names or places and with little analysis, with those outside their circle lacking the knowledge needed to unravel their entries.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike women’s diaries and reminiscences, which possess a vast body of secondary literature, little exists concerning women’s letters. Unlike diaries and reminiscences, letters constituted a “familiar way for individuals to exchange information and elaborate upon a range of feelings.” In an e-mail-less mid-nineteenth century America, letters represented the only way for most families to communicate. For Montana women, personal correspondence helped to create a sense of family despite physical separation.<sup>6</sup> Like diaries and reminiscences, letters also pose their own set of problems. They have a tendency to lean towards “the known things of home,” while “thriving on the allusions of gossip and ‘nough said.” Yet, letters also contain certain themes and numerous references on finding the time to write and demanding replies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Myres, *Westering Women*, xviii and *So Much to Be Done: Women Settlers on the Mining and Ranching Frontier*, Ruth B. Moynihan, Susan Armitage, and Christiane Fischer Dichamp (eds.) (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Z. Bloom, “‘I Write for Myself and Others’: Private Diaries as Public Documents,” in *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries* Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff (eds.) (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Steven M. Stowe, “The Rhetoric of Authority: The Making of Social Values in Planter Family Correspondence,” *Journal of Family History* 73 (March 1987) 920.

<sup>7</sup> Steven M. Stowe, “Singleton’s Tooth: Thoughts on the Form and Meaning of Antebellum Southern

Therefore, to provide a more complete examination, I have supplemented my primary documents with secondary literature regarding western women and nineteenth-century material culture. While women may not have always provided full descriptions regarding their efforts, they usually supplied enough clues that reasonable guesses can be made. In many cases, they depicted their labors in sufficient detail that they can be matched to contemporary fashion and decorating styles.

Although historians have mentioned women's efforts to clothe themselves and create homes from few resources, few have delved into the deeper meaning of these acts. Historians have taken great pains to document the challenges faced by western women and their efforts to "civilize" western communities, but few have examined the psychological state of female settlers.<sup>8</sup> In this thesis, I will address the psychological moods of Montana women as evidenced in their personal documents.

Montana women faced circumstances that tested not only their emotional capacity, resourcefulness, and ability to adapt, but their ability to create "proper" middle-class homes. Beginning in the early-nineteenth century, the home began to be thought of as a purely female space. This ideology of domesticity "gave women a limited and sex-specific role to play, primarily in the home." Domesticity removed middle-class women from the world of commerce, and gave them the task of overseeing their family's moral

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Family Correspondence," *The Southern Review* 25 (April 1989): 325-327.

<sup>8</sup> Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana 1865-1900* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1987); Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women and the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), and Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women "Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880 (Revised Edition)* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998) are just a few examples of the literature regarding women's experiences in the West.

and physical well-being.<sup>9</sup>

During the late-nineteenth century, many women began to rely on their domestic responsibilities to anchor their authority both inside and outside of the home.

Northeastern urban women found themselves charged with the responsibility of creating a proper home because it was thought to balance the masculine sphere of business.

According to Jane Nylander, author of *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860* (1994), the ideal late-nineteenth century New England home was to be “warm, welcoming, comfortable, and unchanging--a stable center--which formed a counterpoint to the surging forces of change in contemporary society.”<sup>10</sup>

Urban middle-class women could center their attentions on their homes because nineteenth-century industrialization had removed many of women’s productive tasks from their homes. Industrialization also removed men’s labor from the home, which isolated middle-class women in their own “separate spheres.” Although “woman’s sphere” limited women’s choices, it also created a female culture distinct from the world of men. Some women benefited from the addition of domestic help to their households as well. While women still supervised their servants and managed their homes and family budgets, they were able to devote much more time to decorating their homes and caring for their families.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 5. In their essay, “Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867,” Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell conclude that pioneer women clung to domesticity, but they did not examine this phenomenon from a psychological viewpoint.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), x.

<sup>11</sup> See Jeanne Boydston *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977);

The late-nineteenth century also witnessed the spread of gentility from upper-class mansions to middle-class American homes, both rural and urban. Gentility can be defined as “the international standard of personal excellence . . . material symbols from wallpaper to tea tables—that first guided the social behavior and consumption habits” of upper-class Americans.<sup>12</sup> Homes became a symbol for all that Victorian culture highly valued: “the principles of gentility and domesticity, along with the material refinement that inevitably accompanied civilized progress.”<sup>13</sup> With the creation of a domestic realm, decorating assumed an important role among women’s duties. Women strove to decorate their homes in such a way that reflected their social standing and refinement as well.

When white, middle-class women began to settle in Montana in the early 1860s, they brought these ideas of gentility and domesticity with them. Although they quickly learned that basic survival superseded all other concerns, many women continued to honor the cult of domesticity and uphold middle-class standards of propriety. Even though an ensemble featuring long hoop skirts and tight corsets was impractical and often unsafe, women continued to don such outfits. Even though the constant wind and dust dirtied women’s carpets, walls and furniture, they continued to paper their walls and cover their floors with ingrain and Brussels rugs. The question then remains: why did

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Glenna Matthews, “Just a Housewife:” *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” reprinted in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) for more information regarding the creation of a domestic sphere and women’s work during the nineteenth-century.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 2. See also Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, vii.

middle-class Montana women persist in maintaining their eastern standards despite the reality of their physical lives?

Recreation of their former living environments enabled these women to maintain emotional links with the friends and family they left behind, and to recreate what they saw as the essential elements of civilization -domesticity and gentility-in their log cabins and tarpaper shanties. Their move to Montana caused stress and emotional upheaval. Reproducing a familiar situation aided Montana inhabitants' development of skills to cope with this stress. Donning a silk hood and importing a Cortland and Collard piano may seem impractical in the twenty-first century, but for nineteenth-century Montana women, items such as these transformed a strange and inhospitable environment into a familiar one that fulfilled emotional needs by allowing these women to enact their beliefs concerning gender and gentility.

The women discussed in this thesis do not necessarily speak about gender in gentility in such explicit terms. Getting at these issues requires some reading between the lines, as well as a little guess work. For this thesis, I selected Kathleen Lindsay of Miles City, Elizabeth Chester Fisk of Helena, Mary Wright Edgerton of Bannack, Lucy Waggy Ramsay of Dillon, Mary Jane Jones Lewis of Howard, and Alvie Nave Kaiser of Myresberg because they all left written documents. Being able to write, as well as references to other literary works, indicates these women are of at least of middle-class origin. This study applies to middle-class women. It makes no attempt to discover whether working-class women felt the same way about domesticity as middle-class

women.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to being members of the middle-class, these women also resided on ranches and in towns throughout southwestern, west-central and the southeastern Montana. I was unable to find any women who lived in the northeastern corner or along the Hi-Line during the late-nineteenth century. This may be due to the fact that this region was not homesteaded until the early-twentieth century. As a result, the use of domesticity as a coping mechanism may not apply to these women.

This paper outlines Montana women's experiences in the years between 1860 and 1900, placing them in the framework of national decorating and clothing trends. Chapter One offers an overview of the concepts of domesticity and coping. In this chapter, I offer my own definition of western domesticity and place women's actions within a psychological framework.

Chapter Two uses women's private writings and scholarship on material culture to trace women's efforts to fashion middle-class homes from limited supplies. Montana women faced numerous challenges in attempting to decorate their homes. Women found it expensive, difficult, and time-consuming to import the latest furnishings to an isolated state like Montana. Interior decorating also required settlers to take time away from duties that aided their survival. Regardless of the difficulties decorating posed and other demands on their time, women persisted because their emotional well-being was just as important as their physical comfort.

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<sup>14</sup> Christine Stansell's *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987) is an excellent study of working-class women in an urban setting, while Mary Murphy's *Mining Cultures: Men, Women and Leisure in Butte, 1914-1941* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997) focuses on western working-class women.

Chapter Three traces women's efforts to dress fashionably despite the impracticality of eastern clothing styles. Nineteenth-century fashions were not conducive to life on a homestead. Yet, for nineteenth-century women to appear in anything else would have been scandalous and unfeminine. For the women discussed in this paper, the emotional distress of deviating from accepted gender practices outweighed the physical discomfort of wearing tightly laced corsets. Loss of feminine persona greatly distressed these women and was a fate to be avoided at all costs. Thus, just as they insisted on decorating their homes according to the latest style, female settlers refused to modify their fashionable clothing.

Nineteenth-century Montana women were not by any means a homogenous group. Living circumstances varied from the eastern Plains sections to the western mountain regions, and from urban to rural. No one woman coped with her situation in the same way as another, but many seemed to share a commonality. Many appeared to embrace domesticity and femininity despite their impracticality. Careful examination of women's personal documents allows historians to gain insight into female settlers' minds, thus realizing a more accurate picture of these women and their lives than my dentist could imagine. Through the use of domesticity, in the form of fashion and decoration, female Montanans created living environments that allowed them to feel civilized as well as secure. Essentially, the cult of domesticity enabled Montana women to cope with their less-than adequate living circumstances and the pain of leaving friends and family.

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## Chapter One

### Domesticity and Coping: Nineteenth-Century Women and the Realities of Montana Settlement

“The temptation is often great to make my home . . . my world,  
to seek not companionship outside its little circle.”  
-Elizabeth Chester Fisk to her mother<sup>1</sup>

When Elizabeth Chester Fisk shared this thought with her mother, she had been living in Helena with her husband’s family for almost a year. This arrangement not only prevented her from creating a home but also limited Fisk’s ability to construct her own domestic sphere. Fisk’s difficulties were compounded by Helena’s lack of civility, which made it difficult for Fisk to avoid society’s pernicious influences. For Fisk, the natural and obvious response was to withdraw within her home. In these circumstances, Fisk’s home gave her comfort, enabling her to cope with her unfamiliar environment.

Elizabeth Chester Fisk was not the only Montana woman to suffer as a result of her living space. Mary Edgerton, Ellen Gordon Fletcher, and the other women of this thesis came to nineteenth-century Montana unprepared for the circumstances that confronted them upon their arrival. Mrs. Edgerton found herself living in a small cabin with a leaky dirt roof and inadequate heating, while Elizabeth Chester Fisk was disgusted

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<sup>1</sup> *Lizzie: The Letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk, 1864-1893* Rex C. Myers (ed.) (Helena: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1989), 48. Dated 24 May 1868.

the "values, assumptions and ideals that enabled them to make sense of their lives"<sup>3</sup> that they brought west with them. At the center of these beliefs was the concept of separate spheres, which placed women in the home and men in the commercial world. However, the ideology of domesticity--part of the cult of true womanhood that developed as a corollary to separate spheres-- developed in the urban Northeast, not the Far West. As a result, adherence to this mindset created a dissonance "between frontier reality and values influenced by the growing eastern middle class."<sup>4</sup> Eastern, middle-class women relied on the tenets of domesticity-- the expectation that women focus their energies on and find fulfillment in the home-- both to shape their sense of self and to give meaning to their daily tasks. Women such as Lady Kathleen Lindsay and Mary Jane Jones Lewis not only took the cult of domesticity west with them, but worked to incorporate this canon into their western lifestyle.

An examination of Montana women's coping strategies must begin with an overview of the cult of domesticity. The cult of domesticity developed during the early-nineteenth century, when the United States moved into a market-based economy and men's and women's lives were sharply separated into the spheres of home and work. In *Democracy in America* (1840), Alexis de Tocqueville placed women's domestic concerns

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*Letters of Mary Edgerton from Montana, 1863-1865*. Edited with an introduction by James L. Thane, Jr. (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, 1976), 2; information regarding Elizabeth Chester Fisk was found in Paula Petrik, "Mothers and Daughters of Eldorado," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (Summer 1982): 50.

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Griswold, "Anglo Women and Domestic Ideology in the American West in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, Ed. by Lillian Schlissel and et al. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1988): p 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz and Janice Monk (ed.) (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 13.

and tasks at the heart of their worlds. Tocqueville believed this “ narrow circle of domestic interests and duties” distinguished American women from their European counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

In the 160 years since Tocqueville, women’s historians have continued to see nineteenth-century women through this lens. Since the 1960s, historians have engaged in often lively debates concerning the extent to which Tocqueville’s closely circumscribed circle characterized the lives of middle-class women. During the 1960s and 1970s, historians such as Barbara Welter and Nancy Cott drew from Tocqueville and other contemporary writings to describe “woman’s sphere” --Tocqueville’s “narrow circle”-- and the traits that “true women” --those who remained within the boundaries set by society-- possessed. While historians have formulated numerous takes on Tocqueville’s “narrow circle,” for the purposes of these thesis, I am only examining those ideas that directly pertain to domesticity. Although the subject of domesticity is rife with complexities and interrelationships, I focus on the works of Barbara Welter, Nancy Cott and Glenna Matthews. Each of these historians possess different views of domesticity as it relates to the larger picture of the ideology of woman’s sphere.<sup>6</sup>

In her landmark 1966 article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,”

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<sup>5</sup> As quoted by Linda K. Kerber in “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History” *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 10.

<sup>6</sup> For other views see the works of Linda K. Kerber “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History” *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” reprinted in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 53-76; Laura McCall, “‘The Reign of Brute Force is Now Over’: A Content Analysis of *Godey’s Lady Book*, 1830-1860,” *The Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (Summer 1989): 217-236 and Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Or you can talk to two really awesome professors at the University of Montana-Anya Jabour and Jill Bergman.

Barbara Welter posited a narrow existence for middle-class women. Welter argues that nineteenth-century women lived in a world in which they were judged by how well they upheld “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” She maintains that adhering to these tenets forced middle-class women to live an often suffocating, narrow and even rigid existence.<sup>7</sup>

A close examination of Welter’s “four cardinal virtues” reveals they did not exist independently of each other, but that domesticity, submissiveness, piety and purity operated in concert. While all these qualities played a significant role in women’s lives, period magazines argued that domesticity was the most prized of a woman’s virtues. Nineteenth-century writers maintained that women’s duties within their homes represented one way for women to reform their families, and eventually, the world. In essence, society’s stability depended on a woman’s maintenance of her home. Women who left their traditional role, threatened to disrupt the social order. This concept of womanhood placed an enormous amount of pressure on women to create the ideal home.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout her article Welter maintains that “a wife should occupy herself ‘only with domestic affairs.’” Contemporary authors maintained that any concern other than housework threatened women’s status as the as “the highest adornment of civilization.” Tasks such as nursing the ill, cooking and sewing not only allowed women to feel useful and accomplished but increased their influence as well. In theory, this female authority radiated outwards from the home into commercial and political arenas. Victorian sources regarded the domestic arena as morally uplifting, and as women’s natural place as

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966), 152.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-163 and 174.

assigned by God.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Barbara Welter, who concentrates on the constricting aspects of true womanhood, Nancy Cott's 1977 book, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, emphasizes the positive ways in which women experienced domesticity. She believes that the cult of domesticity "made motherhood a social and political role that also defined women as a class, and became the prism through which all expectations of and prescriptions for women were refracted." Cott contends that domesticity did not have a blanket effect. Rather, the "bonds of womanhood," which simultaneously bound women down and together in their own separate "woman's sphere," "could be turned to constrain women's autonomy and effect conservative intents, or women could grasp them as cause and opportunity for further change, even for assertion of new social power." Ultimately, numerous middle-class women used domesticity as a springboard for undertaking reform activities.<sup>10</sup>

Although the cult of domesticity acknowledged "the capacity of modern work to desecrate the human spirit," and protested capitalistic values such as the "advance of exploitation and pecuniary values," Cott maintains this social ethic did not challenge this organization of work and the pursuit of wealth. However, the female sphere of hearth and home balanced these materialistic influences by placing women in a position to provide an atmosphere in which the "essential elements of moral government" that allow[ed] men to negotiate the cunning, treachery, and competition of the marketplace" flourished. Through their isolation in the home, women escaped exposure to competitive economic

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 161, 164, 168, and 171.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 5 and 188.

practices, and thus, were able to create a home that served as a sanctuary from the commercial world.<sup>11</sup>

This isolation placed women in a rigidly defined role, with little room for expansion. In order for women's domestic roles "to absorb, palliate, and even to redeem the strain of social and economic transformation," women needed to "sustain traditional values and practices of work and family organization." Placement in the home enabled women to represent "disinterestedness." That is, dependent on their husbands for economic support. Cott maintains that the cult of domesticity went further by demanding that middle-class women adopt an attitude of selflessness. Only by giving up personal self-interest could "women achieve the purity of motive that enabled them to establish moral reference points in the home."<sup>12</sup>

Nineteenth-century moral reformers placed a new emphasis on women's roles as wives, mothers, and mistresses of their households. Like their husbands who dominated the world of business, women presided over their families and homes. Cott argues that contemporary periodicals encouraged nineteenth-century women to use this authority to instill morality and transmit culture to their children. This transmission of proper values allowed middle-class mothers to "fit men to pursue their worldly aims in a regulated way."<sup>13</sup>

While Nancy Cott examine domesticity's role in women's lives, Glenna Matthews, author of "*Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 68-70.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 68-69 and 98.

<sup>13</sup> Glenna Matthews, "*Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4 and Cott, *The Bonds*, 2.

(1987), analyzed domesticity as it appeared in mainstream popular culture. Matthews maintains that at its height in the mid-nineteenth century, domesticity stood as a source of authority for middle-class women. Within this domestic canon, the home took on a new significance. During the 1830s, the home gained an importance that played into the emotional role of the domestic realm. The addition of an emotional content brought a religious dimension to this sphere. Contemporary authors directed women to establish spiritual homes that could serve as the sites for raising “virtuous citizens” who would balance the world of commerce.<sup>14</sup>

According to Matthews, ideas such as this appeared throughout Victorian advice guides, and in contemporary fiction in the form of domestic novels and bad-boy books. These works not only dispersed domestic ideology, but also attacked male culture. Again, Matthews posits that antebellum female writers used the home to provide their “protagonists with the most secure basis for power in an insecure and male-dominated world.” With the infusion of Protestant spirituality, the home became more than a space “where people could meet basic needs . . . but rather as a dynamic scene of actions that could affect the outcome of history.” Drawing upon this idea, female novelists used the home as a way to advance their heroines’ goals and lives.<sup>15</sup>

In fiction, as well as reality, women used the domestic sphere to reform American society. Women drew from mid-century domestic works which stated that women should not see society and home as two distinct spheres, but as one. Rather than isolating themselves from the world, women should extend their energies to reform the

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<sup>14</sup> Matthews, “*Just a Housewife*,” 17 and 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57 and 67.

commercial sphere. Matthews argues that women availed themselves of domesticity's authority because middle-class men were advised to respect this sphere and to subordinate a portion of themselves as a means of achieving the best possible home. This enabled women to exert more influence within their homes, with them eventually expanding their influence to include areas that directly impacted women and their homes.<sup>16</sup>

To summarize, the cult of domesticity created a sharp demarcation between the feminine home and the masculine world of business. Proponents argued that society's stability depended on the maintenance of a stable home by women. In Barbara Welter's vision of domesticity, the middle-class home was the site in which women could best express the four cardinal virtues of submissiveness, piety, purity, and domesticity could best be expressed by women. This existence provided women with few opportunities to venture outside of their domestic spheres. Yet, middle-class women also found that the home and domesticity could provide them with authority. Unlike Welter, Nancy Cott maintains that domesticity enabled women to use this influence to reform society. Dependent on their husbands for financial support, women were able to achieve a state of disinterest that provided them with the authority to reform society.

Advocates of domesticity dispersed their opinions through sermons, religious tracts, books (fiction and non-fiction), and periodicals such as *Godey's*. As with Cott and Welter, Glenna Matthews also posits that women could use their influence within the home to reform the world. Popular culture not only spread this ideology, but also

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 26.



attacked male culture. This literature encouraged middle-class women to adhere to domesticity's tenets, but also persuaded men to follow their wives' guidance as well.

As historians began to study western women in the 1970s and 1980s, they debated the relevance of domesticity to this group. Some, influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," viewed western settlement as an opportunity for women to expand their roles.<sup>17</sup> Sandra L. Myres, author of *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800-1915* (1983), argues that women were liberated by western conditions. As Turner argued that the western experience offered men new prospects, Myres maintains that the West "provided opportunities for [women] to develop and test new talents and to broaden the scope of their home and community activities." Western women did not limit their activities to traditional domestic and community concerns, but expanded their spheres to include the entrepreneurial world as well.<sup>18</sup> Others, such as Julie Roy Jeffrey and Robert L. Griswold, see the persistence of the ideology of separate spheres as female settlers worked to recreate familiar gender roles in unfamiliar surroundings.

When eastern women ventured into western territories, they discovered that their survival depended on merging their domestic sphere with their husbands' worlds. The cult of domesticity wavered in the West because "women had to assume new roles, undertake new tasks outside the proscribed sphere of woman's place." Women found themselves providing goods and services that usually would have been purchased, or

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<sup>17</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exception?* Richard W. Etulain (ed.) (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 17-43.

<sup>18</sup> Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 238 and 242.

exchanged for other needed items or cash. Some women were able to turn their domestic skills into successful businesses. Women worked as cooks, seamstresses and washerwomen to support their children and husbands. Additionally, Myres asserts that the American West enabled middle-class women to become the creators, rather than the guardians, of civilized values and institutions. These activities not only expanded the women's sphere, but also allowed women to retain their claim to moral superiority.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike Sandra Myres, Robert Griswold maintains that the West was not necessarily a freeing experience for women. In his 1988 essay, "Anglo Women and Domestic Ideology in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," Griswold posits that in this region women worked to reestablish the cult of domesticity, despite the difficulties of doing so. He argues that nineteenth-century domestic ideology existed less as a rigid set of rules, but more as a cultural system that enabled western women to "perceive and shape their culture," as well as decode reality and define and set limits on their actions.<sup>20</sup>

Griswold contends that while western Anglo women inherited a cosmology rooted in eastern conditions, "it was an ideology that was fluid, elastic, and complex: women explained their own actions by assumptions, sometimes wrestled to align behavior with diverse perceptions of its tenets, and modified it to meet changing realities." Women selected what applied to their circumstances and rejected what did not. Although female western settlers altered the cult of domesticity to meet their expectations, similarities remained. Domesticity continued to provide women with sense of self-worth, to offer a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7 and 241.

<sup>20</sup> Griswold, "Anglo Women," 16.

feeling of stability in an unstable world, and to foster bonds between women.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to Griswold, Julie Roy Jeffrey offers a view of western domesticity in which pioneer women deliberately worked to recreate its original eastern form on their homesteads and in their towns. Rather than abandoning domesticity's tenets, women looked to reestablish eastern social institutions and maintain middle-class social values no matter how unfavorable the situation seemed. Pioneer women shied away from "challeng[ing] conventional gender roles and accepted modes of behavior." Although Jeffrey admits that western settlers found it difficult to replicate eastern ideas regarding a woman's proper place, she maintains that "these ideals helped women retain their sense of self and offered them hope of an ever-improving life."<sup>22</sup>

While Griswold implies that western women shaped domesticity to meet their needs and circumstances, Jeffrey claims that women retained a rigid view of the cult of domesticity. Despite her assertions that the West tolerated female departure from eastern norms and that western women undertook unfeminine tasks, Jeffrey continues to stress that women did not forsake "the larger conception of women's nature or that they ceased to value female culture. Nor did it mean that they attempted to work out a new definition of women's sphere." Instead, Jeffrey suggests that while their new environment altered women's environment, the West "had only a limited impact on their views."<sup>23</sup>

For the purposes of this thesis, I choose to see domesticity not as a restrictive force in the lives of western women, but as springboard for embracing their domestic

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 17 and 18; see also Julie Roy Jeffrey's *Frontier Women: "Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880* (Revised Edition) for additional information regarding this redefinition of domesticity.

<sup>22</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: "Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880* (Revised Edition) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 6 and 36.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 80.

pursuits. Rather than adapting domesticity to western conditions, the women profiled in my paper adopted an inflexible approach to domesticity. In this vein, my view of western domesticity resembles Jeffrey's work more than Griswold's ideas. Montana women chose to partake in tasks that reinforced their domesticity. While their selection of interior decorating and stylish clothing were, by nature, creative endeavors, they represented a way for these women to remain in a space where they felt comfortable—that of their domestic sphere.

Western settlement often created realities which the eastern manifestation of the cult of domesticity could not incorporate into its tenets. A lack of suitable housing, sufficient help and poor economic conditions created circumstances which forced women to assume a strange and unfamiliar role. Although the market economy had not entirely removed household production from urban middle-class women's homes, most women were unused to the hard labor required by homesteading. Female settlers responded to this environment by recreating the circumstances of their eastern homes. Much of this recreation centered around furnishing the home and sewing feminine and fashionable clothing.

For female settlers, these tasks fell into the canon of domesticity, but not the restrictive domesticity described by Barbara Welter. As Nancy Cott writes, "a person's work . . . not only earns a living and fills time but also contributes to self-definition and shapes social identity."<sup>24</sup> Western settlement usually necessitated that women absorb some male tasks into their sphere, altering their domestic identity. Like its eastern

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<sup>24</sup> Cott, *The Bonds*, 20.

counterpart, western domesticity concentrated on the home, but with a twist. My definition of western domesticity focuses on women's efforts to create a comfortable living space, but not restrict women to their homes. The domesticity embraced by Montana women was one which recognized women's agency, but was not limited to women's efforts in their homes.

Even though western domesticity lacked the submissive elements of the cult of true womanhood, it still contained its more moralistic elements. Many women feared that western settlement, with its renewed emphasis on women's economic importance, "threatened to rob women of their claim to moral superiority." Eastern women found that through participation in the antislavery movement, they could stretch this domestic mindset "to expand women's moral and cultural responsibilities." A domesticity which focuses on homes and fashionable clothing enabled western women to continue to maintain social values, mold behavior, and preserve culture. This form of domesticity permitted Montana women to hold onto eastern behavior expectations regardless of their circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

Women's lives on the frontier were not only physically difficult but impacted women emotionally, causing them to develop symptoms of stress. Psychologists define stress as "extremes of disturbance of biological and psychological functioning." Stress occurs because individuals appraise environmental events as harmful, threatening or challenging. Individuals feel stress because they "perceive that their personal resources

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<sup>25</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: "Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880*, revised edition, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998): 80

may not be sufficient to meet the demands of the environment.”<sup>26</sup> When applied to the women of this thesis, stress was brought about by pioneer women’s interactions with their external environment. Living in a rough mining town or in a primitive shanty caused stress because of a mismatch between “an individual’s resources and the perceived challenge or need.” Pioneer women viewed these environments as negative or unpleasant because they lacked the ability to control their circumstances. Situations that lack predictability and opportunities for control do not allow the person experiencing the stress “to make a plan or develop ways of coping with the problem.” That is, an imbalance exists between the requirements needed for survival and an individual’s ability to cope with the situation.<sup>27</sup>

Mary Lewis exhibited similar symptoms when she arrived in southeastern Montana in July of 1888. In her first letter home, Lewis described her new environment as “a strange country and I cannot tell you half now.” Added to this feeling of unfamiliarity, was the pain of missing her home and family. This particular letter concluded with a postscript, which stated: “Write me all the news, anything, everything; how I wish I could see you all for about 5 minutes.”<sup>28</sup>

Although their living conditions did not always endanger their physical lives, numerous female homesteaders suffered a type of psychological trauma. This reaction

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<sup>26</sup> Richard S. Lazarus. *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966): 3. While there are numerous definitions and models regarding stress and coping, I have chosen one that focuses on an individual’s experience with an external environment because it fits my thesis the best. Also see Shelley E. Taylor, Letitia Anne Peplau and David O. Sears, *Social Psychology*, 8th edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), 563.

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn M. Aldwin. *Stress, Coping, and Development: An Integrative Perspective*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994): 24 and 38.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Jane Jones Lewis to her sister, 9 July 1888, in the Mary Jane Jones Lewis Small Collection 1918, Montana Historical Archives, Helena Montana.

resulted from experiencing “conditions that disrupt or endanger well-established personal and social values of the people exposed to [stress-causing circumstances].”<sup>29</sup> While a female western settler’s living environment did not threaten immediate bodily harm, the conditions “may have subtler but nonetheless harmful effects.”<sup>30</sup> Assuming masculine tasks and living in barely hospitable shacks far from friends and family troubled women. Alvie Nave Kaiser was one woman who seems to have experienced these feelings when her husband became ill or left their ranch for extended periods. During these moments, Kaiser became responsible for his chores as well as her own. These conditions made it difficult for her to approximate the ideals of nineteenth-century domesticity.<sup>31</sup>

Stress was also created as western women applied meaning to their new homes. Women’s negative views regarding the West complicated their struggle to control and master these situations. These women saw the West as a place in which they could not establish a domestic persona in their new homes.<sup>32</sup> For women, frontier life meant a lack of comforts: female friends, acceptable housing and clothing, and separate spheres. By imbuing settlement with this sort of meaning, an “uncertainty about . . . the maintenance of one’s identity” developed. This ambiguity, in conjunction with the lack of control over their environment, caused women to feel anxiety, depression, fear, and even anger.<sup>33</sup> The lack of ability to control their own and their family’s pain, the disruption of community life, and the loss of loved ones also impacted the stress suffered by women.

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<sup>29</sup> Lazarus, *Psychological Stress*, 4 and Taylor and et al., *Social Psychology*, 476.

<sup>30</sup> Aldwin, *Stress, Coping*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> From the diary of Alvie Nave Kaiser, Small Collection 1488, Montana Historical Archives, Helena, MT.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth A. Holroyd and Richard S. Lazarus. “Stress, Coping, and Somatic Adaptation,” in *Handbook of Stress: Theoretical and Clinical Aspects*, ed. Leo Goldberger and Shlomo Breznitz (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 22.

<sup>33</sup> Lazarus, *Psychological Stress*, 6-7.

Like Mary Lewis, Elizabeth Fisk also faced multiple threats to her mental well-being. The combination of living with her in-laws, an absent husband, and few female friends appears to have left Fisk feeling isolated and frustrated. Fisk describes her situation as

another source of regret that I had not a pleasant home in which to remain during his absence [her husband's]; but a public boarding house was not to be thought of in this country and not situation in a private family presented itself.<sup>34</sup>

These themes of loneliness and frustration appear again in correspondence dated 24 May 1868. In this letter, Fisk discusses the transient nature of Helena's residents, with an emphasis on how this impacts her. She writes:

Nothing is permanent. One's best friends leave them in a day and pleasant acquaintances [sic] prove mere gossip [sic]. I have only one lady friend that I could depend on should misfortune or sorrow come . . . .

Although Fisk's feelings do not appear to be overwhelming, she was obviously impacted emotionally by her circumstances, otherwise she would not have commented on them in her correspondence.<sup>35</sup>

While psychologists defined stress as extreme disturbance, the word itself conveys "the idea that the person. . . [was] beset by powerful pressures which greatly tax the adaptive resources of the . . . psychological system."<sup>36</sup> Pioneer women might have been able to cope with inadequate housing, but combined with the absence of friends and family and an inability to measure up to the prescriptive literature, the lack of comfortable living quarters could push these women to the edge. Women had to respond to these

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Chester Fisk to her mother, 28 December 1867, in the Fisk Family Papers, Manuscript Collection 31, Montana Historical Archives, Helena, Montana. Hereafter cited as Fisk Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Fisk Papers, 24, May 1868.

<sup>36</sup> Lazarus, *Psychological Stress*, 10.



threats or risk damage to their psychological system.<sup>37</sup>

In facing these threats to their domestic persona, western women developed strategies to deal with these forces. Coping can be defined as “the process of attempting to manage demands that are viewed as taxing or exceeding our resources.”<sup>38</sup> Women needed to develop coping strategies because in these situations, their were not always automatic. Urban eastern living conditions had left women unprepared for the circumstances surrounding life on the western frontier. They often coped by trying to recreate their former homes in the West.

Assumption of this coping strategy was not necessarily a conscious action. This can make it difficult to locate evidence of domesticity as coping in women’s personal documents. While analysis of personal correspondence shows that these women were aware of their actions, their writings do not reflect deeper thoughts regarding their sewing or decorating. That is, women did not analyze their actions. To them, tasks such as arranging furniture or sewing lace onto a petticoat reflected aspects of daily life, not a way to cope with their psychological problems. Most psychologists believe that people respond unconsciously with defense mechanisms to environmental demands. Although some psychological experts believe that individuals consciously manipulate their external surroundings as a means of dealing with environmentally caused stress, others challenge this paradigm by stating that the coping process is by its very nature automatic and not under conscious control.<sup>39</sup>

Women adapted to western conditions by turning to the familiar cult of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor and et al., *Social Psychology*, 478.

<sup>39</sup> Aldwin, *Stress, Coping*, 152-53.

domesticity. Although women could not perfectly replicate their eastern circumstances, they could use the canon of domesticity to recreate the emotional conditions of their previous homes. Psychologists describe this strategy as problem-solving coping. This approach constitutes “attempts to do something constructive to change the stressful circumstances.” In their 1975 article, “Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867,” Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell describe the impact of western migration on women schooled to adhere to domesticity’s dictates. According to Faragher and Stansell, the strains of trail life served as a catalyst for the eruption of “tensions inherent in this separatist ideology, often repressed in the everyday routines of” eastern life. These explosions occurred because a successful migration required the collapse of the sexual division of labor that governed men and women’s lives. While this blurring of gender roles created the possibility of an enlarged scope and power of family life, it created circumstances in which pioneer women “lacked a cultural rationale” for their work. Instead, Faragher and Stansell maintain that these women “fought *against* the forces of necessity to hold together the few fragments of female subculture left to them.”<sup>40</sup>

Faragher and Stansell posit that the merging of gender spheres created a situation in which frontierswomen struggled to hold onto their domestic identities. As with my definition of domesticity, Faragher and Stansell see domesticity not as a way to constrict women, but as a source of identity. Unlike their eastern lives, life on the trail did not

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<sup>40</sup> Johnny Mack Faragher and Christine Stansell, “Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867.” In *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (eds.) (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 248, and Taylor and et al., *Social Psychology*, 478.

provide women with “a sense of inclusion and a cultural rationale to give meaning to the suffering and the work; no augmented sense of self or role emerged from augmented privation.” In conjunction with the absence of regular female chores, tasks such a driving a wagon and gathering buffalo chips fell so far outside of women’s usual realm that female pioneers lacked a concrete base for their identities.<sup>41</sup>

As women settled in areas such as Montana, they discovered little resemblance between their new and former homes. A lack of established industry forced families back to a subsistence lifestyle, placing an added burden on women. This new responsibility not only blurred the lines separating gender spheres, but disregarded domestic doctrine as well. While the cult of domesticity stretched its definition to accommodate western conditions, this expansion threatened women’s claim to moral superiority.<sup>42</sup>

Like the pioneer women of Faragher and Stansell’s article, female Montana settlers looked for ways to recreate an environment which provided them with security and comfort in an unfamiliar world. Under the auspices of western domesticity, Montana women transformed their surroundings into living spaces that met their emotional needs. That is, Montana settlers created areas in which they could uphold domesticity’s tenets.

While women could not repair a leaky roof, eliminate a dirt floor, or remove distance separating them from friends and family, they could develop strategies that minimized these conditions. Through the use of nineteenth-century publications such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, Montana settlers continued to adhere to eastern trends regarding fashion and home decoration as a means of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>42</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 19-20.

transforming their living conditions. In this sense, women such as Elizabeth Chester Fisk and Mary Jane Jones Lewis were able to create atmospheres similar to the ones they had left behind. Wearing petticoats and wallpapering a home may not seem like much, but these practices allowed pioneer women to feel comfortable in strange environments. Altering living environments and donning proper clothing enabled women to cope with the western lifestyle.

These behaviors indicate successful coping by nineteenth-century Montana women. Resumption of previous life activities often suggests that an individual has overcome their stressful living environment. Although women's diaries and letters may not reveal feelings such as anxiety and depression, psychologists posit that coping strategies are successful if they reduce negative emotions such as these. Problem-solving coping also permitted pioneer women to return to their previous life's activities.<sup>43</sup>

While women may not have voiced their feelings or talk about stressful circumstances in their diaries, letters, and reminiscences, clues regarding their mental states do exist within these documents. Changes in handwriting, entry/letter length, and the amount of detail can all signal stress. Those writers who were familiar with published diaries and their recognized style may have also "resorted to that formalized language at emotional moments in their writing." Yet, the absence of emotion does not signify that women were content with their lives. A lack of emotional response may indicate attempts to sustain their "mental equilibrium." Any deep examination of feelings could disrupt women's carefully constructed emotional states. As such, women may have avoided

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor and et al., *Social Psychology*, 479 and Gayle R. Davis, "Women's Frontier Diaries: Writing for Good Reason," *Women's Studies* 14 (1987):11.

voicing concerns and fears because it was easier to deny them if they were not written down.<sup>44</sup>

Women embraced domesticity as a coping strategy because it represented something familiar. Unlike mining towns and homesteads, which were strange and unknown to these women, domesticity and its accompanying prescriptions signified a link to their lives in the East. These links not only symbolized a relationship with friends and family, but cozy atmospheres that provided these women with emotional reminders of who they were as well. This link also carried with it aspects of civilization in the form of separate gender spheres that permitted western women to recapture a sense of their previous lives. For Montana women, domesticity was a crucial and successful way to cope with the rigors of western settlement.

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<sup>44</sup> Davis, "Women's Frontier Diaries," 11 and "The Diary as Historical Puzzle: Seeking the Author Behind the Words," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (1993): 171.

## Chapter Two

### Velvet Carpets, Cottage Furniture and Ingrain Rugs: Montana Women and their Homes

“ . . . we are houseless-homeless- . . . for the second time  
Faye has been ranked out of quarters!”  
Frances Roe, November 1882

As the wife of an Army lieutenant, Frances Roe knew the pain of leaving friends and homes in the name of military duty. This knowledge did not make it easier for Roe to leave her assigned quarters after a superior officer requested the rooms she shared with her husband. Although the fort’s commander found Roe and her husband two rooms and a shed for storing belongings, Roe found this unacceptable. Roe wrote that she felt “very much as though [she] was in a second-hand shop. Things [were] piled up to the ceiling in both rooms, and the shed [was] full also.”<sup>1</sup>

Frances Roe was luckier than most Montana pioneer women. The Army provided the Roes with housing at each of the forts where she and her husband were stationed. Although military housing often lacked amenities, Roe usually found herself with four solid walls, a firm roof and multiple rooms to live in. For Roe, however, a home consisted of more than living space bounded by walls, a roof and a floor. It should be a spot in which to establish the familiar atmosphere of her eastern home. Roe’s anger at being “ranked out” stemmed from the amount of time and energy she had devoted to

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<sup>1</sup> Frances A.M. Roe, *Army Letters From an Officer’s Wife, 1871-1888* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1909), 306.

creating a “cheerful little home” from standard fort housing.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike other female Montana residents, Frances Roe did not have to worry about housing. While Roe was more fortunate than her peers, she shared with them the same intense desire to create a familiar home environment. Most newly-settled women waited months or years before they moved into a frame house, surrounded by houseplants, contemporary furniture, and handmade quilts. Other-male-concerns, such as locating employment or staking a mining claim, took precedence over house construction. During this period, women lived in tents, dugouts or very primitive shacks until their husbands found the time to locate and finance building materials. Due to a lack of physical strength and technical skill, women found themselves waiting until their husbands possessed the time to erect a home. by

Although the labor of constructing a home fell to their husbands, women took it upon themselves to add personal touches as a means of bringing a sense of home to often less-than-comfortable living quarters. These attempts usually consisted of displaying family photographs, treasured items that survived the trip west, or improvising furniture from whatever supplies existed. Such actions brought both psychological comfort and personal satisfaction to these women. Montana settlers needed this comfort because they were facing situations in which they lacked the necessary coping skills. Circumstances such as improper housing, no female companions and the addition of male chores caused women to feel symptoms of stress. Creation of a familiar living environment allowed women to bridge the distance between their former homes and Montana, easing their

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 305.

stress. For these reasons, Montana women took the furnishing and decorating of their often crude and inadequate homes very seriously. In undertaking these tasks, women were embracing domesticity.

Nineteenth-century ideas concerning suitable housing focused on the home's atmosphere as well as its physical structure. Social critics believed that the home's physical structure and its general ambiance "mirrored the moral and religious state of those who lived in it." As a result, contemporary periodicals encouraged middle-class Americans to create homes which promoted the idea of beauty as manifested by God, combined with the feeling of morality. "Since beauty was connected to God, anything that was beautiful would manifest what was good." Numerous critics associated certain types of houses and furnishings with beauty and morality more so than other housing and furniture forms. Establishment of these standards rested on an environment containing a dwelling and possessions "that encapsulated and transmitted" beauty and morality.<sup>3</sup>

Creation of a comfortable living atmosphere extended beyond the home to include dress, hobbies, and behavior as well. Through the spread of periodicals such as Godey's, these women knew of the new emphasis on comfort. Nineteenth-century women saw architecture, home furnishings, and appearance as signs of respectability. These signs of material culture marked one as a member of the gentility, rather than as a member of the rougher, lower classes. While adornments and affectations represented social class, they also symbolized the aura of comfort many Americans sought for their homes during this period. Comfort not only involved conditions such as warmth, good food, restful chairs

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<sup>3</sup> David P. Handlin, *The American Home: Architecture and Society, 1815-1915* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 14-16.



and accessible conveniences, but also implied “a moral condition achieved through retirement from the bustle of high life and retreat into wholesome domesticity.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite their living conditions, western women took an enormous amount of pride in their efforts to create a home from a earthen dwelling or tarpaper-covered shack. These women worked to create homes that matched Victorian standards of taste by adding whatever decorative touches they could.<sup>5</sup> Using items they brought west with them, along with ingenuity and advice from period periodicals, pioneer women found ways to bring a bit of style to their crude homes. Availing themselves of how-to guides, they either brought with them or sent for the instructions for creating knick-knacks and bric-a-brac using bits of fabric, lace, flowers and beads.<sup>6</sup> Results may not have replicated contemporary decorating conventions, but they served until women could afford proper furnishings and carpets.

Accomplishments such as braiding a rug from old rags or sewing curtains from an old dress not only brought women a sense of pride, but helped women to re-create an environment that satisfied their emotional needs. The also represented ways to control and master stressful circumstances that permeated life in Montana. Creating a home that contained Berber rugs, upright pianos, and wicker furniture while living on the dusty prairie might seem silly, but decorating helped these settlers eliminate environmental

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<sup>4</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 251 and 167-68.

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Griswold, “Anglo Women and Domestic Ideology in the American West in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* Edited by Lillian Schlissel and et al. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Roderick Kiracoff and Mary Elizabeth Johnson, *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort, 1750-1950* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1993), 164.

demands that caused them to feel stress.<sup>7</sup> Rooms containing quilts, an oak bed set, and matching drapes represented an atmosphere in which women did not feel as isolated or alienated. A fully furnished home also allowed women to express their more domestic side. A properly decorated home not only allowed Montana female settlers to retain their domestic space and personal identity, but to cope with life as well.

The late-nineteenth century marked a time when furnishings previously reserved for the wealthy found their way into the homes of middle and working-class Americans. Previously, cost and availability limited the diffusion of quality wallpaper and carpet to the elite classes in metropolitan areas. Technological innovations, as well as the growth of the fashion magazine industry, allowed the average American access to what had previously been the domain of the wealthy.<sup>8</sup> Women moving beyond the edges of civilization no longer felt they had to leave behind the comfort and civility of the East; instead they brought these qualities represented by furniture west with them.

Roughly constructed shacks or sod homes which lacked flowers or small pictures of biblical scenes failed to communicate a family's Christian morality. Instead, these structures conveyed the failings of their inhabitants. Yet, this was an inaccurate portrayal of people such as Elizabeth Chester Fisk, Mary Wright Edgerton, and Lady Kathleen Lindsay. These women and other Montana settlers came from eastern middle-class surroundings, or in the case of Lady Lindsay, the English aristocracy; soddies and tar paper shanties did not accurately reflect their beliefs and values. In areas with limited

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth A. Holroyd and Richard S. Lazarus, "Stress, Coping, and Somatic Adaptation," in *Handbook of Stress: Theoretical and Clinical Aspects*, ed. Leo Goldberger and Sholomo Breznitz (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 22 and 26.

<sup>8</sup> Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger W. Moss, *Victorian Interior Decorating: American Interiors, 1830-1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986), 85.

choices, Montana women appear to have chosen housing which offered the least inaccurate portrayal of themselves. While this housing may have constituted the best possible choice, western housing often lacked the qualities necessary for it to be considered suitable by eastern standards.

While coping primarily implies a psychological state, it encompasses a variety of processes as well. In this paper, I use coping to describe western women's efforts to create eastern living conditions in their Montana homes. Accompanying this physical reproduction is a mental process. To cope with their new environments, Montana women also needed to fabricate a self-image congruent with the ones they had left behind. By molding their new living circumstances to fit their needs, women were able to create images that assured them of their public status-that of well-bred and proper middle-class women . As such, Montana settlers placed an emphasis on their appearances because replication of eastern standards regarding public status and self-image problem solving coping strategy.

Having arrived in Montana Territory with few personal items, Mary Wright Edgerton was forced to cope the best she could. Arriving in Bannack in 1863, Mary found herself in a world vastly different from that of her small Ohio town. What housing existed was in the form of small and crude mining cabins. Mary's husband, Governor Sidney Edgerton, was fortunate to locate a structure that in its previous life had been a store. This log building consisted of a large room with a kitchen, which also served as the family dining room, annexed to it. Governor Edgerton then divided the rear rooms into two smaller rooms, which were used as bedrooms, while the front half contained a

combination living room and bedroom and a office for Mr. Edgerton.<sup>9</sup>

While this structure lacked proper heating, windows and an indoor water source, Mary Edgerton did the best she could. In a letter, dated 4 October 1863, Mrs. Edgerton described to her sister, their “good board floors,” which in her mind, constituted an improvement over the animal hides that composed the flooring of other Bannack homes. Regardless of her present living quarters, Edgerton felt that once “we get our house finished and things arranged, we shall be very comfortably situated.” This comfortable feeling arose in part from Edgerton’s recent experience of “living out doors, and sleeping in tents and wagons these cold nights.” Although her home was very primitive and less comfortable than the home she had known in Ohio, Mrs. Edgerton felt less strange and more-at-ease in this primitive structure than in a wagon.<sup>10</sup>

These feelings of comfort arose from the fact that unlike her period of trail life. Edgerton could exert a certain amount of control over her Bannack living environment. While elements such as a lack of heat and the primitive nature of their home could not be changed, Edgerton could add decorative touches such as rugs that aided in the transformation of this rustic Montana cabin. However, Edgerton’s task was complicated by her omission of numerous household and personal items from her supplies.<sup>11</sup> Edgerton’s letters to her Ohio family seek to address these oversights by enclosing

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<sup>9</sup> This information is from *A Governor's Wife on the Mining Frontier: The Letters of Mary Edgerton From Montana, 1863-1865*, ed. James L. Thane, Jr. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Tanner Trust Fund, 1976), 46-47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> When the Edgertons left Ohio, they thought they were going settle in Idaho’s territorial capital, Lewiston. With this in mind, Mary did not bring certain items because she thought they would be available in Lewiston. Sidney Edgerton had originally been appointed governor of Idaho Territory, and did not become Montana’s territorial governor until he petitioned for the creation of a separate Montana territory in 1864. Due to the lateness of the season when the Edgertons arrived in Bannack, they could not proceed to Lewiston and were forced to settle in Montana.

requests for items unavailable in Montana, or those of a personal nature. The same letter that describes her living quarters also contains this thought concerning Edgerton's preparation for the move: "If I had known we were coming here, I think I should have left some things I brought, and some that I left should have been brought here."<sup>12</sup>

Even though Governor Edgerton had yet finished his alterations to their new home, Mrs. Edgerton had already begun to plan its decoration. In her correspondence, Edgerton informed her sister that she had "made my rag carpet and as soon as we can have a fireplace and chimney built, shall put it down on our front room." These plans also included looking for items that she had carried across the plains. Edgerton's search appeared to concentrate on a specific table cloth. Her letter states that she did

not remember selling it or giving it away. I was very much disappointed in not finding it for I was certain than it was packed in one of the boxes. I intended to have brought it. It would be very useful to me.<sup>13</sup>

This table covering not only served a practical purpose, but possibly evoked numerous memories of home and family gatherings as well. It was probably for this reason, more than the practical purpose, that Edgerton desired this article.

While Mary Edgerton appears to have made few improvements to her simple Bannack home, Ellen Gordon Fletcher delighted in updating her Summit City home. Arriving in Montana from New York in the summer of 1866, Fletcher faced many of the same problems as Edgerton, namely a lack of suitable housing. Unlike the Edgertons, who did not build a house, Fletcher and her husband decided to live in temporary quarters while they built their house. However, unlike Mary Edgerton, Ellen Fletcher brightened

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<sup>12</sup> Edgerton, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 65.

up these short-term quarters using whatever was available. Fletcher's letters to her family not only describe her efforts, but commented on her family's decorating schemes as well. Her efforts as well as her discussion with family regarding their undertakings allowed Fletcher to establish solid and obvious reminders which tied her physically and emotionally to her family, while working to maintain her domestic role despite her surroundings.

While awaiting the completion of her home, Fletcher lived in a log cabin among the shops and mines of Summit City. Fletcher describes her first home as "very good sized and comfortable." Unlike some of the other women of this study, Fletcher does not denigrate her surroundings or seem embarrassed by her short-term quarters.<sup>14</sup> Fletcher begins by stating that "the houses are all built of logs [with] a few of them hav[ing] broad fronts with a short cornice which makes them look very well." She continues with a brief description of canvas covered interiors, that is, covering the ceiling with a heavy and light-colored canvas material. According to Fletcher, this "makes them [the cabin's interior] look light and cheerful." Fletcher also adds that some cabins were carpeted with canvas as well, but this seems to have been the exception rather than a regular practice among Summit City residents.<sup>15</sup>

In the following letter, dated August 20th, Fletcher provides a more detailed description of Montana floor coverings in relation to those used by her family. Although separated by geography, discussions of decorating helped to bridge the distance that

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<sup>14</sup> All of the information regarding Ellen Gordon Fletcher comes from Fletcher's letters, which can be found in *A Bride on the Bozeman Trail: The Letters and Diary of Ellen Gordon Fletcher, 1866*, Francis D. Haines, Jr., ed. (Medford, Oregon: Gandee Printing Center, Inc., 1970), 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

divided the Gordon family. Fletcher begins this letter by stating that she “would like to step in and see how you look at home now. I would really like to see *that new carpet*. It must have been quite an *event* when it came *at last*.” While reality prevented Fletcher from seeing the new carpet, this correspondence allowed Fletcher to re-create an emotional environment in which she could exert her domesticity. These letters not only provided information regarding contemporary furnishing trends, but also reassured Fletcher that although she lived in a primitive cabin, her surroundings did not have to reflect this rudeness.<sup>16</sup>

Fletcher compares the eastern-style carpet to western improvisations with a favorable eye. Rather than sneering at the use of wagon covers for carpets, Fletcher sees this as a practical alternative to carpet. According to Fletcher, this heavy canvas “looks very well and keeps clean better than I should have thought.”<sup>17</sup> The use of canvas as floor may not have bothered Fletcher because her family may have employed oil cloths in their home.

During the mid-nineteenth century, oil cloths served as an alternative to painted or carpeted floors. Although they were mainly found in areas of heavy traffic, such as halls and kitchens, western women could have adapted canvas for this same use throughout their homes. Oil cloth, or canvas, did not require the scrubbing needed by hardwood floors and was impervious to the dampness and cold air that often seeped in from open cracks in floorboards. In the case of western homes, which often lacked wood floors, stretching canvas over dirt not only kept the house cleaner but helped to make a frontier

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

home less primitive and more home-like.<sup>18</sup>

Fletcher's letters contain more information regarding the furnishing of her home. Aside from a few camp chairs, and several straw and feather beds, it appears as though Fletcher and her husband brought little furniture with them to Summit City. This was due in large part to the demands placed on a family's oxen. Often, heavier items such as cook stoves and iron bed stands would be left along the trail in order to lighten the load for tired oxen unable to pull wagons up steep hillsides.<sup>19</sup> Upon reaching their final destination, Ellen Fletcher and her husband had to purchase or construct furniture for their home.

Like many other Montana settlers, Fletcher possessed a knowledge of nineteenth-century interior design. When she depicts the chairs her brother purchased in Omaha, Fletcher not only displays her knowledge of contemporary carpet weaves, but compares these chairs to ones found in her parents' parlor as well. Fletcher painted these furnishings as "very pretty, dark color, with a back something the style of our parlor chairs, and the bottoms are made of thick carpeting-Brussels or something for covering chairs, small figured one red, the other green."<sup>20</sup> Employing this language enabled Fletcher to control her self-image, rather than allowing trail life, and later settlement, to alter her sense of self.<sup>21</sup> The act of writing, in conjunction with the physical act of

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<sup>18</sup> Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger W. Moss, *Victorian*, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Pioneer Women: The Lives of Women on the Frontier* (New York: Smithmark Publishers, 1996), 56.

<sup>20</sup> Fletcher, *A Bride*, 17. Her letters do not contain additional references to these chairs. Although she does not mention them again, I assume they became a part of her Summit City home decor.

<sup>21</sup> For a complete explanation of this concept, see Amy L. Wink, *She Left Nothing in Particular: The Autobiographical Legacy of Nineteenth-Century Women's Diaries* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).



decorating, served to connect Fletcher to her family as well as her domestic identity.

Fletcher's comparison of the chairs' upholstery to Brussels carpet implies that her knowledge of decorating went beyond a basic familiarity, but include a comprehensive knowledge of specific carpet and furniture styles. Unlike ingrain carpet, which was composed of flat, woven carpets made in narrow strips that were woven together, Brussels carpet was a pile carpet. Despite the growth in carpet manufacturing, Brussels carpets were found mainly in upper-class homes.<sup>22</sup> Although Fletcher did not participate in the selection of these chairs, she obviously approved of them. Their upholstery satisfied not only her ideas of style but allowed her to establish a solid connection with the world she had left behind.

This comparison of eastern and western furniture continued once Fletcher reached Summit City. From her descriptions it appears that her furniture extended beyond the one-legged bed stand or the three-legged stool that appeared in numerous western homes.<sup>23</sup> Ellen Fletcher spends little time commenting on the rudeness of Montana furniture, but focuses on the practicality and usefulness of these items. While frontier tables and bed stands may have lacked the elegance and style of eastern, middle-class furniture, Fletcher saw these articles for their intrinsic value. As primitive and rude as they were, these pieces of furniture helped Fletcher to transform her cabin into a cozy home. One such example includes Fletcher's bed stands. Purchased by her husband in Summit City, she describes them as "mostly made cottage style and look quite pretty in

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<sup>22</sup> Ellen M. Plante, *The Victorian Home: The Grandeur and Comforts of the Victorian Era in Households Past and Present* (Philadelphia and London: Courage Books, 1995), 34.

<sup>23</sup> For a full description of homesteader furniture, see Evadene A. Burris's "Furnishing the Frontier Home" *Minnesota History* 15 (1934) 181-193.

the little cabins, looking so white and clean, stained with neither varnish nor paint.”

Fletcher’s use of the term cottage style refers to the simple and charming furniture of the 1850s. Cottage style pieces usually appeared in the bedrooms of middle-class Americans who could not afford the grandeur and opulence of Rococo Revival or Renaissance Revival bedroom sets. Although Fletcher’s bed stand was produced by a Montana craftsman, rather than one in Boston or Philadelphia, she found it an acceptable substitute.<sup>24</sup> Her reference to this style indicates that her family probably owned furniture of this fashion. As such, this rough copy not only allowed Fletcher to recreate her physical home, but establish an emotional link with her family.

Although Elizabeth Chester Fisk arrived in Helena in the late 1860s, she faced the same problem as Mary Wright Edgerton and Ellen Gordon Fletcher: lack of appropriate housing. When Elizabeth Fisk arrived in the summer of 1867, she found herself faced with the prospect of having to live with her husband’s family. Circumstances not only forced Fisk to live in a log cabin, but dictated that she and her husband share the cramped quarters with three other people. This situation created an intense desire in Fisk for a home of her own, as well as hampering her efforts to enter Helena’s social scene. Fisk’s situation was further complicated by the extended absence of her husband. It was not until June of 1868 that Fisk found a home of her own, a simple “log house, clap-boarded and plastered.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ellen M. Plante, *The Victorian Home*, 148 and 164; Cynthia V.A. Schaffer and Susan Klein, *American Painted Furniture, 1790-1880* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1997), 35 and 40; and Charles Boyce, *Dictionary of Furniture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1985), 72.

<sup>25</sup> This information regarding Fisk’s initial months in Helena comes from *Lizzie: The Letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk, 1864-1893* Rex C. Myers, ed. (Helena: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1989), 27, 30, and 48.

Moving into her own home allowed Fisk to unpack the furnishings she had brought from St. Louis the year before and establish a home that matched her needs and wishes. While this proved to be another temporary home, it alleviated the feelings of homesickness that had plagued Fisk since her arrival in Helena. Living with her in-laws and surrounded by their furnishings was not conducive to Fisk's coping with her unfamiliar living environment. She could not create an atmosphere that reminded her of the one she had left behind in Connecticut.<sup>26</sup>

In describing her decorating efforts, Fisk listed and depicted her furnishings, as well as items such as china and cutlery. Like many other Montana women, Fisk devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to the setting up of her home. As she wrote to her mother, "[m]y new home shall come first." Fisk spent the following days and weeks laying carpets, unpacking crates, and arranging furniture in order to turn this cabin into a pleasant home, "a little bit of Paradise."<sup>27</sup>

Even though she did not move into her "little bit of Paradise" until 1868, Fisk's furnishings did not consist of the usual jumble of used tables and makeshift chairs. Due to her expenditures in St. Louis, each room contained furniture of the latest style. While she does not describe her furniture in great detail, it is reasonable to assume that her pieces not only reflected late 1860s fashion, but were reminiscent of her parents' furnishings as well. This allowed Fisk to create a home that fulfilled her need for a home suggestive of the one she left behind, as well as the latest fashion trends.

From her correspondence, it appears that Fisk took great pains to coordinate her

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

carpet colors with the woods of her furniture. Undoubtedly, she planned her color schemes as she shopped for furnishings and carpets in St. Louis. Her use of carpet throughout her home reflected the increase in production that occurred between 1850 and 1860. This translated into lower costs and an improvement in production techniques, which allowed for a wider use of carpeting in a greater swath of homes. As a result, carpet ceased to be viewed as a luxury, but became a basic household furnishing.<sup>28</sup>

Fisk most likely carpeted her home using either an ingrain weave or a three-ply carpet. These styles constituted eighty to ninety percent of all carpets manufactured in the United States during the years surrounding the Civil War, as well as the weaves utilized by middle-class homeowners. However, she may have used a more expensive rug in her parlor. Decorating critics of the 1860s preferred the use of more expensive carpets in more formal rooms such as the parlor or dining room.<sup>29</sup>

Fisk's correspondence reflects a knowledge of the French-inspired Rococo Revival, but she chose not to follow it. This style drew from the French domestic style of the mid-eighteenth century. While Victorians looked to certain elements for inspiration, they chose not to embrace the simple aspects of the eighteenth-century French style. Rather, Victorian women created interiors that were both conventional and excessively ornamental.<sup>30</sup> While many contemporary periodicals encouraged the use of parlor carpets that featured enormous roses circled by wreaths and garlands intertwined with Baroque-style moldings and acanthus leaves, Fisk chose a "parlor carpet [that] is green with wood

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<sup>28</sup> Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger W. Moss, *Victorian Interior Decorating: American Interiors, 1830-1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986), 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Elan and Susan Zingman-Leith, *Creating Authentic Victorian Rooms* (Elliot and Clark Publishing: Washington D.C., 1995), 31-32.

colors.”<sup>31</sup> Although she neglects to provide a full description of her parlor floor covering, Fisk paints her oak bedroom set as “the plainest but handsomest I ever saw, . . . all of oak. It has none of these gaudy landscapes only carvings and mouldings [sic].”<sup>32</sup> Most contemporary critics encouraged the use of bedroom furniture with huge, arching headboards and a ruffle of carved roses at its upper edge.<sup>33</sup> Obviously, Fisk preferred a toned-down version of the standard Rococo Revival design. When she selected her other furniture pieces and accouterments, Fisk probably followed this pattern and chose other, similar, less elaborate furniture.

Even though Elizabeth Fisk leaned towards a less ornate version of Rococo Revival, she followed the guidelines regarding the use of color in a room. In her letters, Fisk neglects to mention her wall treatments. Due to the temporary nature of this home, Fisk may not have painted or wallpapered her walls as convention called for, and as a result did not describe her walls to her family. While wall treatments usually played a major role in determining the overall look of a room, Fisk’s carpet fulfilled this role. The green of her carpet reflected the green seat cushions in her black walnut chairs and a matching easy chair. Fisk’s choice of curtain- “a light buff tinge, and green bordered”- finished with green cords and tassels also reflects Fisk’s choice of green as her main color.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The information regarding idealized parlor decoration comes from Zingman-Leith’s *Creating Authentic Victorian Rooms*, 36, while the Fisk quote is from Fisk Family Papers, Manuscript Collection 31, correspondence from Elizabeth Chester Fisk to her mother, Azuba Fisk 5 July 1868. Hereafter referred to as Fisk Papers.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Fisk was raised in a Republican and Congregationalist household, hence her conservative attitudes regarding furniture.

<sup>33</sup> Zingman-Leigh, *Creating Authentic Victorian*, 46. The Rococo Revival was also beginning to fade in favor the less-ostentatious Charles Eastlake-designed furniture.

<sup>34</sup> Fisk papers, letter from Elizabeth Chester Fisk to her mother, 5 July 1868.

However, Fisk's choice of two main colors mirrors the late 1860s Rococo Revival fashion of using two colors that harmonized or contrasted with each other. Harmonizing shades included violet, peach, salmon, sage and brownstone, while contrasting colors often consisted of hues such as crimson and green. Fisk's pairing of green with a series of browns indicates her choice of harmonizing colors over contrasting hues. Combining matching black walnut furniture, with elegant and traditional, low-key accessories, Fisk was able to create the formal High Style parlor that would have been found in any eastern middle to upper-middle class home during this period.<sup>35</sup>

By making her house her number one priority, Elizabeth Chester Fisk consciously chose to create an atmosphere that suited her specific emotional needs. While some women would have furnished their homes with little thought to color coordination or contemporary trends, Fisk's letters clearly demonstrate that she devoted an enormous amount of time and effort to the decoration of her home. Undoubtedly, this took Fisk away from other important chores, but to Elizabeth Fisk this was a legitimate task. Fisk's efforts represented a way for her to assert both control and domesticity in an environment that permitted the loosening, rather than the tightening, of gender roles. Yet Fisk along with Mary Edgerton took time from their hectic work schedules to establish pleasing and comforting living environments.

While Elizabeth Chester Fisk and Mary Wright Edgerton found themselves in rustic log cabins, other women found themselves living in even less sophisticated forms of housing. As an Army wife, Frances Roe lived in a tent as her husband moved from

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<sup>35</sup> Ellen M. Plante, *The Victorian Home: The Grandeur and Comforts of the Victorian Era in Households Past and Present* (Philadelphia and London: Courage Books, 1995), 12, 29-30.

one frontier fort to another. Unlike Frances Roe, Mary Jane Jones Lewis spent several months living in a tent. Although Lewis arrived on her husband's southeastern Montana homestead in July of 1888, it appears as though she did not move into a log house until November of that same year. Due to his sheep ranching responsibilities, Hugh Lewis was unable to complete their home until after winter had begun.<sup>36</sup>

Once completed, the Lewis home consisted of four log walls and a dirt roof. While log walls spared Lewis from dealing with the lack of ventilation and the dampness of an earthen home, she still dealt with the effects of a dirt ceiling, which included rain, dirt and snakes dripping from the ceiling. In her letter, dated 22 July 1888, Lewis paints complete picture of her living environment. This correspondence stated that "all houses are made of log here with dirt roof and only one story high they look so low before you get to them you would think you could not stand up."<sup>37</sup>

While little information exists regarding Mary Lewis's eastern living conditions, her letters indicate that Lewis's family occupied a respectable, multi-storied frame house that contained the appropriate furnishings and accoutrements. At this stage, Lewis lacked many of the items she and her family considered a necessary aspect of the middle-class lifestyle. Not being able to decorate and furnish her home according to prevailing middle-class standards reflected Lewis's apparent lack of refinement. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, the display of furnishings such as cupboards and carpets by homeowners indicated that "at certain moments and in certain places, people chose to be

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<sup>36</sup> This information regarding Mary Lewis's living conditions comes from the Mary Jane Jones Lewis small collection 1918, Montana Historical Society, Helena MT. Hereafter cited as Lewis Correspondence. Lewis's letters regarding her housing are very vague, but from the time she settled into a tent until Hugh Lewis completed their home, Lewis does not mention any other housing.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Jane Jones Lewis to her sister, July 22, 1888 from the Lewis Collection, MHS.

polite to elevate themselves to a more refined mode of living that elsewhere in their lives was impossible to attain.”<sup>38</sup> In this sense, Mary Lewis’s frontier home differed from her previous living conditions because it lacked the required objects that not only provided her new house with a sense of familiarity, but could also announced Lewis’s cultured refinement as well.

Despite her surroundings, Lewis found ways to furnish and decorate her cabin in a socially acceptable manner. Like Elizabeth Chester Fisk, Lewis’s baggage included numerous pieces of furniture that she had ordered and arranged to be shipped from Chicago. These items included “one chamber set and chairs [unreadable] springs mattress dishes silverware everything we could think of, [and an] extension table.” This shipment, along with several boxes from home, did not come until August of 1888, a full month after she settled on her husband’s homestead.<sup>39</sup> Montana’s remote location often necessitated the shipping of furniture and supplies from eastern stores.

Lewis coped with her inferior housing conditions by shaping her rooms to fulfill the emotional needs that were not met by the dirt ceiling and barren floors. Mary Lewis began this process by “sewing the lining for the house . . . it will be lined with cotton cloth.”<sup>40</sup> This project occupied Lewis until June of 1889, when she finally “put the lining on top of the Dining room.” In a letter to her sister, Lewis explained it took several months to complete this project, but because “of the stove did not put lining on ceiling untill [sic] now.” The ceiling went unlined until June because Lewis was waiting until

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<sup>38</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 230.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis Correspondence, Lewis to her sister; The list of items purchased in Chicago came from a letter dated 9 July 1888, while the information regarding arrival came from a letter dated 9 August 1888.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 December 1888.



the stove could be moved into the kitchen. While Lewis's letter lacked a clear explanation regarding the moving of the stove from the dining room into the kitchen, it sounds as though Lewis was waiting for the kitchen to reach a point of completion. As Lewis wrote to her sister, "our stove now is in the kitchen which is as yet unfinished, but nice for summer [use]." This indicates that perhaps the Lewises were still building their cabin, but that the cold Montana winter had forced them into their home before it was finished.<sup>41</sup>

Besides describing her efforts to beautify her rustic cabin, Lewis also explained why she lined her ceiling and walls. According to Mary Lewis, "all log houses you know they line them with cotton cloth and paper or calsamine [calcimine] or anything afterwards." Some women chose to paper their walls in the latest trend, however, Lewis waited until 1891 to take on this task.<sup>42</sup> Calcimine was a nineteenth-century paint made of tempera colors, water and sizing. The use of sizing (glue or casein) made calcimine much more durable than whitewash. Lining the walls with cloth or old newspapers not only helped keep the cold out but gave the walls a neat appearance.<sup>43</sup> Although lining one's walls served a practical purpose, it also replicated decorating trends of the late-nineteenth-century.

Prior to the 1850s, only the rich could pay to paper their walls. It was not until the introduction of machine-produced wallpapers in the 1840s and early 1850s that prices

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 9 June 1889.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. See Winkler and Moss's *Victorian Interior Decorating* for a more complete description of this term. The information regarding the papering of Lewis's dining room came from a letter dated 24 July 1893.

<sup>43</sup> Riley, *Frontierswomen*, 42 and Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999 ninth paperbound printing), 146.

dropped to a reasonable level. By the 1870s and 1880s, middle-class homeowners could afford to follow the high fashion by wallpapering almost every room in their houses. While French-produced wallpaper or domestic knock-offs were popular throughout the latter-half of the nineteenth-century, many middle-class homes continued to feature painted walls.<sup>44</sup>

Wall motifs grew more elaborate as the nineteenth-century wore on. At various points, critics favored using moldings to divide walls into panels that could be papered or covered with rich fabrics in an imitation of the eighteenth-century Louis XVI style or dividing walls into Charles Eastlake's three-part aesthetic division. This latter style, which featured a frieze, dado and field, far outlived the imitation Louis XVI style. These terms referred to wall divisions. The frieze composed the upper portion of the wall, usually between two and three feet in width. The field made up the middle section, where pictures could be hung. The dado was found at the bottom of the wall, usually three to four feet high.<sup>45</sup> However, with the introduction of the Aesthetic Movement in 1875 and the beginning of the William Morris Tradition in the late 1880s, walls, as well as other decorating elements, became more simple.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to calling for simple wall decoration, these traditions also specified bare hardwood floors, with scattered throw rugs, rather than the wall-to-wall carpet look of previous decades. Due to her subscriptions to *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *The Ladies' Home Companion*, Lewis was aware of this shift to relatively bare floors, as well

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<sup>44</sup> Zingman-Leith, *Creating Authentic*, 37-38.

<sup>45</sup> For a more complete description of these terms, consult Zingman-Leith's *Creating Authentic Interiors* and Winkler and Moss's *Victorian Interior Decorating*.

<sup>46</sup> Winkler and Moss, 75 and Zingman-Leith, 64.

as the preference of hardwood over softwood flooring. Periodicals such as the ones Lewis subscribed to contained suggestions that minimized the appearance of softwood floors.

Lewis's correspondence indicates that she used some of these ideas in her home.

Lewis focused much of her energy on her dining room floor. Due to her house's limited space, use of Lewis's dining room was not restricted to meals, but was used throughout the day. In light of this usage pattern, one would think that Lewis would simplify her floor covering by using matting or oil cloth. However, Lewis chose a floor that reflected late 1880s decorating trends. Lewis's descriptions of her efforts indicate the influence of the Aesthetic Movement and its offshoots.

Following the advice of contemporary critics, Lewis began by printing a border around the edge of this room.<sup>47</sup> By border, Lewis meant using materials that simulated the effect of a parquet floor. She most likely used wood carpeting, a material similar to parquet, but much thinner and composed of hardwood strips glued to a heavy muslin backing. Wood carpet could then be installed over a pre-existing floor to create the effect of parquet flooring, at an affordable cost. Lewis then placed a carpet in the center of the room. Although this letter provides no specific information regarding its weave, color or pattern, later letters fill the gaps in Lewis's writings.

Subsequent correspondence described the types of carpet Lewis had seen in other Montana homes. Lewis's remarks regarding rag carpets contradicts the popular idea that homemade rugs were a common part of western decor. She explains that

[r]ag is an expensive luxury here as they charge 25 [cents] for weaving.  
In light of the cost of weaving, people found it "cheaper to buy Ingrain or

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<sup>47</sup> Lewis correspondence, to her sister, 24 July 1893.

brussels [sic]. Several families have brussels [sic] here. They send away East for it.

Rather than making do with what they had, Lewis and her neighbors preferred to order furnishings that replicated eastern decorating trends.<sup>48</sup>

Even after Lewis completed the floor and walls, her dining room continued to concern her. For a woman with several small children, a vegetable garden and other assorted time-consuming tasks, the decoration of one room occupied a significant part of her day. Later letters highlight Lewis's continued focus on her home, despite having finished decorating it several years earlier. In correspondence dated 24 July 1893, Lewis writes:

I done nothing this spring towards fixing up the house but painting the dining room floor and using four big velvet carpet rugs on it. I painted it [the floor] walnut, and clean and no matter how much I clean, every speck of dust shows and every scratch. . . . The dust seems to blow in so I have not papered since two years ago, but have used double rolls I had left in patching.<sup>49</sup>

Although Lewis had decorated her home in a pleasing and comfortable manner, she found it necessary to modify her decor to reflect the shifts in interior design. In creating an environment that suited her emotional needs, it was important that her decor remain as fashionable as circumstances permitted. Lewis's painting of the floor reflected the continued trend of disguising softwood floors by painting them. Late-nineteenth century revival and craftsman interiors still favored the simplicity of bare floors with throw rugs. Many homeowners then covered these floors with machine-made carpets woven in

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<sup>48</sup> In *Frontierswoman: The Iowa Experience*, Glenda Riley remarks on the widespread use of rag carpets in western homes. This information regarding the weaving of rugs comes from Lewis correspondence, to her sister, September 1, 1890. I have no idea how accurate Lewis's statement is. It seems to me that the cost of shipping would cost more than the actual weaving.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis correspondence, to her sister, 24 July 1893.

designs that imitated those from Turkey, Persia and India.<sup>50</sup> Lewis fails to adequately describe her rugs, but it is likely that she sought rugs that copied these styles.

While Montana settlers such as Mary Jane Jones Lewis did their best to reproduce contemporary decorating in their homes, the best they could do was approximate these trends using available materials. From her correspondence, it appears that Lewis devoted more time and attention to the condition of her floors than her walls. However, in her reminiscences, Lady Kathleen Lindsay of Miles City seems to have devoted far more attention to her walls.

Like Mary Lewis, Kathleen Lindsay found herself living in a shack that consisted of a “very nice sitting room, bedroom and dressing room with a little room for saddles etc.” As described by Lindsay, this shack was built from pine logs, with smaller bits of wood and mud plaster filling the gaps between the logs. While Lady Lindsay notes that “the inside could be left bare or, either planked up, or canvas stretched across,” she chose to recreate late 1890s decorating trends in this primitive shack.<sup>51</sup>

In decorating her log shack, Lady Kathleen Lindsay was undoubtedly aware of the Aesthetic Movement, which placed an emphasis “on simpler, less cluttered interiors.”<sup>52</sup> Her choice of elements reflected this style. Like previous nineteenth-century decorating trends, the schools of the 1880s and 1890s incorporated new elements and added their own unique stamp to components such as colors, patterns, and

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<sup>50</sup> Winkler and Moss, *Victorian Interior Decorating*, 203.

<sup>51</sup> Reminiscences of Lady Kathleen Lindsay, in small collection 1692, Montana Historical Society, Helena MT, hereafter cited as Lindsay Reminiscence.

<sup>52</sup> Winkler and Moss, *Victorian Interior*, 182. This advice was proffered by critics in periodicals such as *Godey's*, *House Beautiful*, *House and Garden* and other magazines of this nature during the last decade of the nineteenth-century.

accessories. Although showy and cluttered interiors continued to appear, critics encouraged Americans to incorporate less-ostentatious wall schemes, less-elaborate window treatments, and bare wooden floors.

Unquestionably Lindsay's lack of access to a fully-stocked store limited her choices. However, her selection of decor parallels 1890s trends too much to be a coincidence. To recreate an atmosphere similar to her upper-class Irish home, Lady Lindsay began by "sewing yards and yards of unbleached calico together which was secured at the top with a moulding [sic]." As with Mary Lewis, Kathleen Lindsay used this plain calico lining to insulate her cabin from the cold and to hide the log walls. In her sitting room, Lindsay created a dado by covering the plain calico with "a butcher blue thick cotton cloth," and finished with a molding about a third of the way from the floor. Lindsay painted the remaining calico with a "pale cream distemper."<sup>53</sup> Her color choices coincided with those emphasized by critics of this period. Most 1890 critics preferred walls featuring light-colored hues such as rose, blue, light gray, cream, fawn or pale olive green because these shades gave the room an airy and cheerful look.<sup>54</sup>

Inclusion of a sitting room was not a standard feature among Montana homesteader living quarters. Most female Montana settlers found themselves pressed for basic living space, and could not reserve a room devoted to cozy family evenings, leisure

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<sup>53</sup> Lindsay Reminiscences. The term distemper is a term used primarily in England to describe paint containing water, tempera colors, and sizing. Sizing is a glue that is added to water-based paints to make them more durable. American critics used the term calcimine to describe this material, which was more durable than whitewash. For more information regarding Lindsay's decorating efforts see Donna Lucey's *Photographing Montana 1894-1928, The Life and Work of Evelyn Cameron* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2001). The two women were friends, and as such Cameron's correspondence discussed Lindsay and her living situation.

<sup>54</sup> Plante, *The Victorian Home*, 88-89.

or productive handiwork. A sitting room often housed a family's book collection or the family piano, items not commonly found in tar paper shanty or crude log cabin.<sup>55</sup>

Lindsay's decision to dedicate this space to sitting room decor stemmed from the arrival of her Collard and Cotlard upright piano, and her aristocratic background. She needed a room for her piano, and nineteenth-century etiquette did not allow Lindsay to place this musical instrument in any other place. While she states in her reminiscences that "the furniture was mostly improvised . . . but with a little ingenuity things could look attractive," Lindsay somehow came into possession of "a divan and a few comfortable wicker armchairs and a solid round table" to complete her sitting room.<sup>56</sup> Lindsay's use of a divan drew from the 1880s Exotic Revival trend, which looked to pre-industrial societies for inspiration. Although few homes were decorated entirely in this manner, most featured a nook or corner furnished in this middle eastern style.<sup>57</sup>

For Lady Kathleen Lindsay this sitting room was more than a place to play the piano or sew, but a space that connected her with her Irish roots. Though a sitting room seems impractical on an eastern Montana ranch, it provided Lady Lindsay with an area in which she could exert her domesticity. On the frontier, domestic qualities did not always help one to survive the harsh weather and the constant work. Yet, by devoting time to the decorating and furnishing of a primitive shack, Lindsay could exert a measure of control over the only aspect of her life that she could: her home. By choosing to devote the extra time and effort to enhancing her log shack, Lindsay was consciously embracing a very

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<sup>55</sup> Plante, *The Victorian Home*, 88-89.

<sup>56</sup> Lindsay reminisce. While Lindsay states that the table was a gift to her husband, she provides no details on the other pieces. The divan is essentially a couch without arms or back.

<sup>57</sup> Zingman-Leith, *Creating Authentic*, 80.

domestic identity. In the uncertainty of ranch life, holding onto an impractical persona not only allowed Lindsay to feel somewhat connected with her former home, but it made the unfamiliar southeastern Montana landscape seem less strange.

Lindsay continued to follow nineteenth-century decorating conventions by simplifying her bedroom decor. She used the same calico on this room's walls, but did not create a dado. Instead, this Irishwoman tinted the calico with a pale pink distemper.<sup>58</sup> Her selection of bedroom decor indicates that Lindsay followed critics who urged homeowners to take into account a room's use before decorating it. The bedroom called for "cleanly, airy, and cheerful" colors, while parlors, which saw more activity, required "full-toned, rich, juicy" hues. Using a limited color scheme in both rooms also followed critics' advice. By the late 1890s, magazines such as *The Ladies' Home Companion* and *The Ladies' Home Journal*, advocated the replacement of tertiary colors with primary and secondary tones. These publications offered the idea that contrasting and analogous colors could be combined in a monochromatic fashion, so that a room's color scheme only consisted of shades or tints of one color. This trend reflected the emergence of a new decorating philosophy, in which "the fewer the colors used in a room, the better."<sup>59</sup>

Women who settled in Montana faced numerous difficulties, among them a lack of suitable living quarters. Most women did not have access to the luxurious furniture owned by Lady Kathleen Lindsay, Mary Jane Jones Lewis or Elizabeth Chester Fisk. Nor did most possess the spirit or attitude of Mary Wright Edgerton and Ellen Gordon Fletcher. However, all women, regardless of wealth or living condition, found

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<sup>58</sup> Lindsay reminiscences.

<sup>59</sup> Winkler and Moss, *Victorian Interior*, 194-195.



themselves dealing with the problem of living in an environment that did not meet their emotional needs. Montana homes often lacked the personal items and amenities that linked women to eastern friends and family members. The creation of a home that suited their needs, as well as corresponded to eastern decorating trends, constituted one part of the search for an environment that met these women's emotional needs. Reestablishment of these living spaces enabled women to return to former traditions, allowing them to cope with Montana's challenges.

## Chapter Three

### Collars, Cuffs and Chemises:

#### Women's Need for Civility and Femininity

**"It never occurred to me to ride back skirtless"  
from the memoirs of Lady Kathleen Lindsay**

Lindsay, while riding a horse, was thrown and ripped her skirt. Left miles from the ranch without a spare skirt, Lindsay had two options: She could ride home in her petticoat, or she could find a way to repair her skirt. Lady Lindsay chose to repair the skirt. She selected this option because to appear in public without a proper skirt was scandalous and improper. For Kathleen Lindsay, a member of the Irish aristocracy, appearing publicly in anything less than proper dress would have marked her as less-than civilized.

While western conditions allowed women to loosen some fashion restrictions, women such as Kathleen Lindsay resisted doing so. Contrary to popular belief, western women did not abandon conventional feminine clothing in favor of a "frontier style." Mainstream American culture assumes that western settlement "shocked women into a more 'common sense' attitude about their clothing," leading to the conclusion "that fashionable dress played an insignificant role on the frontier because it was not physically comfortable." True as the latter portion of this statement may be, Montana settlers continued to don fashionable clothing that was ill-suited to the realities of western life.

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As established by Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell in their 1975 essay, "Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842 -1867," western

migration interrupted previously well-established gender roles.<sup>1</sup> This disruption, in conjunction with women's physical and emotional isolation, created situations in which Montana women searched for ways to hold onto their sense of femininity. Accordingly, Montana women appreciated signs of their femininity. Fashionable clothing represented civilization and feminine identity, "and thus women struggled to maintain these vestiges of a familiar environment" once they settled in the West.<sup>2</sup>

In this thesis, I use the term feminine to convey qualities that are ascribed to women. During the nineteenth-century, characteristics such as sensitivity, delicacy and prettiness were seen as belonging to women rather than men. As with domesticity, Victorian novels and periodicals encouraged women to embrace these attributes. Women who displayed masculine traits such as physical and mental strength were not accepted by mainstream society. While western conditions called for women to abandon beauty and delicacy, most women appeared to have continued to cling to them.<sup>3</sup>

Western settlement introduced newly arrived women to a host of environmental conditions for which their previous lives had not prepared them, and did not accommodate feminine characteristics. Lacking social supports and survival skills, these settlers had to find coping strategies. Instead of relying on previously established coping skills, Montana settlers found themselves having to create new ways of responding to stress. In order to deal with their new lives, women worked to recreate an atmosphere in

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<sup>1</sup> Johnny Mack Faragher and Christine Stansell, "Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842 -1867" reprinted in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (ed). (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 246-266.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Helvenston, "Fashion on the Frontier" in *Dress* 17 (1990): 143.

<sup>3</sup> For my definition of feminine, I drew from Nancy Isenberg's *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

which they felt comfortable and well-adjusted. Some Montana middle-class women worked to establish a sense of eastern civilization through the use of fashionable clothing.

Despite concerns that ranged from less-than-adequate shelter to finding reliable water, Montana women remained concerned with stylish clothing. This preoccupation may have stemmed from their awareness of the rules governing proper dress.

Knowledge that donning masculine-style clothing would have cast these female settlers into a less-than-feminine and uncivilized role may have squelched any thought of adaptation. Or women may have continued to wear eastern fashions because of their fixation on their civilized past.<sup>4</sup> Both ideas apply to Montana women because they used eastern styles as a way of remaining civilized, as well as feminine, in unfamiliar settings.

This continued interest expressed itself in women's personal documents. Women like Mary Lewis and Mary Edgerton wrote their families long letters describing their sewing efforts, while others, such as Alvie Nave Kaiser and Lucy Waggy Ramsay, chronicled their projects in daily diary entries. In their letters, women not only described their projects, but also included sketches, fabric scraps and requests for supplies as well. They often noted if their current sewing endeavor was a necessity or a luxury item such as a cashmere riding habit. Often, women discussed their feelings concerning their sewing activities. Not all sewing evoked feelings of happiness; some projects provoked anger and frustration. However, these women saw their projects through to the end because despite the anger and frustration, sewing helped to relieve their feelings of anxiety, homesickness and loneliness.

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<sup>4</sup>See B.M. Brandt, "Arizona Clothing: A frontier perspective" *Dress* 1989 (15) 75 for more information regarding these ideas.

To these women being civilized represented the existence of certain cultural standards. Stylish clothing “represented a system of personal culture, as well, as wealth and taste,” providing these women with a status separate from some of their neighbors. In this sense, being civilized or genteel lifted women to “a higher plane,” while diminishing those who could not remain fashionable. Possession of culture signified that an individual belonged to “polite society.” As with their homes, Montana women placed a premium on their appearances because this signified a return to previous habits.<sup>5</sup>

Montana settlers devoted time to fashion because they wished to remain aligned with contemporary fashion protocol. Contemporary letters and diaries demonstrate that these women were not only aware of nineteenth-century clothing conventions, but they also worked to remain within them. Their personal documents also show that these women altered some clothing details to suit their tastes, materials, finances, and the demands of daily life. These women, along with other female pioneers, were concerned with remaining civilized. Western frontier inhabitants “continued to wear clothing from eastern or midwestern locations rather than make changes in clothing to adjust to the climate of the [Montana prairie].” It appears that Montana women found it difficult to ignore clothing norms, even when the Montana environment “suggested the importance of doing so.”<sup>6</sup>

The late-nineteenth century also marked the invention of the sewing machine, the creation of a system of standardized proportional measurements, and the introduction of ready-made clothing. Regardless of a woman’s circumstances, these innovations meant

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<sup>5</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 9, 25 and 207.

<sup>6</sup>Brandt, “Arizona Clothing,” 75.

that “no fashion, however new and elaborate, was denied” to any woman. Women’s tastes were “limited only by the amount of time available and their degree of skill, given that they could afford the fabric.”<sup>7</sup> Montana women used these advances to continue creating fashions that resembled those of the East, rather than garments more suited to their circumstances. For these women, “the comforts of ‘civilization’ appeared in the form of lengths of calico and silk and the patterns they received through the mail.”<sup>8</sup>

While eastern middle and upper-class women sported extensive wardrobes, the demands of western migration often precluded women from bringing along nothing more than a few basic frocks and other necessities. This trend continued once women settled in a mining town or on a homestead because these conditions did not encourage the wearing of highly fashionable clothing. These years were marked by women unwillingly abandoning “all pretense of fashion,” because of financial circumstances or living conditions. Numerous women “lived and died in that state, never gaining enough leisure to reach for cultural or frivolous improvements. And for others it was only much later . . . that their feminine instincts were finally awakened.”<sup>9</sup> However, most women made due with the clothes they brought west with them, until conditions allowed them to augment their wardrobes with small luxuries. Yet, this did not stop women such as Mary Lewis and Alvie Kaiser from finding ways to incorporate current styles into their lifestyles, despite the impracticality of nineteenth-century dress. Instead of sewing garments that met basic requirements, these women created clothing that reflected not only their social

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<sup>7</sup> Joan L. Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900* (Kent and London: The Kent State Press 1995), 294-295.

<sup>8</sup> Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer*, 294-295.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

class, but eastern fashion trends as well. Their letters and diaries demonstrate a conscious effort to create garments that did not serve their lifestyle, as well an interest in keeping up with contemporary fashion trends.

Mary Edgerton's letters to her Ohio relatives focused on the lack of supplies, particularly fabric and clothing, in Bannack during the 1860s. In the early-1860s, merchants imported supplies from Salt Lake City via overland routes to Montana. As a result, basic items such as flour and sugar were expensive and luxury goods like cloth and thread were not always available.<sup>10</sup> Despite this lack of proper sewing supplies, Edgerton found ways to clothe her family, and follow 1860s fashion demands.

Between regular shipments from her eastern relatives, the supplies her husband brought from his trips to the East, and Edgerton's remaking of garments, Mary managed to clothe her children and herself in a respectable manner. Edgerton's task was further complicated by her pregnancy of late 1863 and early 1864, but was also eased with the addition of a sewing machine.<sup>11</sup> Although Edgerton does not describe her sewing endeavors in terms of 1860s fashion style, she provides enough basic details that educated guesses can be made regarding Edgerton's adherence to eastern fashion styles.

Edgerton began with requests for materials to update her bonnet. During the early 1860s, women always wore a hat or bonnet when appearing in public. The first years of this decade favored bonnets that were spoon or oval shaped, with a high crown, and tied under the chin with broad ribbons. Bonnets could be any color, and women lavishly

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<sup>10</sup> See K. Ross Toole's *Montana: An Uncommon Land* for a full description of life in early Bannack.

<sup>11</sup> Following nineteenth-century dictates, Edgerton did not discuss her pregnancy, nor did she provide an exact date regarding the birth of her baby, Lucia Idaho. Edgerton's letters are not clear regarding the sewing machine, either. It sounds as though this item was shipped separately, rather than accompanying the Edgertons to Montana.

trimmed their headgear using feathers, ribbons and flowers.<sup>12</sup> In a letter dated, 7 March 1864, Mrs. Edgerton tells her sister of plans to send for down to trim her hood. Mary follows this with an associated sewing endeavor:

I think I did not say anything about lining. [I] expect to make the hood of my plaid bonnet. [I] think blue will be as pretty as any color for lining, but you may send enough of each, pink and blue silk, to line it, then I can use either.<sup>13</sup>

Edgerton's reference to the hood alludes to a type of headwear different from, but similar to, the bonnet. During the nineteenth-century, women wore hoods not only while traveling, but for evening wear as well. Contemporary fashion critics considered the hood to be "not altogether inelegant in its appearance, as [were] so many of the head-gears of this description."<sup>14</sup> Mary Edgerton would have felt comfortable wearing a hood as she walked through Bannack because she would have been in accordance with national fashion trends.

Although Edgerton's letter lacks a full description of her hood, it appears that she intended to adapt her pre-existing plaid bonnet to this purpose. Based on her correspondence, it sounds as though Edgerton may have been planning a traveling hood, a style popular in 1862. This hood's general design consisted of the basic bonnet shape, in that it completely covered the head, with the neck covered with an extended bavolet or curtain. In a sense, the hood was similar to the classic western sunbonnet, but much more elegant. *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* described one traveling hood as "made of

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<sup>12</sup> Frances Grimble, *After a Fashion: How to Reproduce, Restore, and Wear Vintage Styles* (San Francisco: Lavolta Press, 1993), 39; and Severa, *Dressed*, 206.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Edgerton, *A Governor's Wife on the Mining Frontier: The Letters of Mary Edgerton From Montana, 1863-1865*, ed. James L. Thane, Jr. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Tanner Trust Fund, 1976), 80.

<sup>14</sup> As quoted in *Hair, Hat, Hood, and Bonnet, Too: Of the Era of the Hoop*, compiled by Heidi Marsh, (Greenville, CA: privately printed, 1993), 97.



white cashmere, bound and lined with cherry-colored silk.”<sup>15</sup>

The request for specific colors and silk reflect Edgerton’s desire to remain stylish, despite her circumstances. Although her choice of pink and blue did not match the colors suggested by *Godey’s*, they probably coordinated with Edgerton’s wardrobe. While the hood served a practical purpose, Edgerton’s choice of a silk lining did not. A more sturdy fabric such as canvas or something similar, while unfashionable, would stand up much better to Montana weather. Yet, sporting a canvas hood would have meant Edgerton had ceased to be fashionable and as such, uncivilized. Wearing a silk hood helped assure Mary that Bannack was not such a strange and uncivilized place.

Much of Edgerton’s correspondence reflects this practice of re-working and updating older garments. Bannack’s lack of dry goods, in addition to Edgerton’s growing children, necessitated her numerous supply requests as well almost constant sewing. Throughout 1864, Edgerton’s letters not only describe her sewing projects, but detail “the many presents” sent to her from Ohio.<sup>16</sup> From Edgerton’s correspondence, it appears that much of what was sent was practical in nature, but Edgerton’s sister often included luxury items such as additional bonnets, hats, and shawls which were warmly received by Mary Edgerton.

During the summer of 1864, Edgerton received numerous packages from her mid-western relatives. In a letter dated 31 July 1864, Edgerton described the dresses sent to her as being “rather large and long for me, I [could] remedy that very easily. I like them

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted by Heidi Marsh, in *Hair, Hat, Hood*, 97. The reference to the bavolet comes from Betty J. Mills, *Calico Chronicle: Texas Women and Their Fashions, 1830-1910* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1985), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Edgerton, *A Governor’s Wife*, 80.

very much.”<sup>17</sup> Other than the dresses not fitting well, Edgerton provides few details regarding their design, except that she enjoyed them. This same period also witnessed another shipment of supplies from Ohio. As with her previous letters, Edgerton briefly described the items sent by her mother and sister. Her letter dated 3 August 1864 expresses her joy and gratitude at receiving these gifts from her relatives. Edgerton states: “Tell Mother that the shawl she sent me is a beauty. I thank her very much for it. . . I like all the dress goods very much, particularly the merino.”<sup>18</sup> These goods not only eased Edgerton’s sewing, but also established a link to the habited and well-developed Midwest.

Edgerton’s wording regarding these dress goods indicates they were purchased, rather than sewn by Edgerton’s family. While ready-made clothing was not widely available in the 1860s, Edgerton’s Ohio family apparently lived near a store which sold pre-made dresses. In addition to not fitting well, manufactured goods may not have reflected 1860s styles accurately. It often took some time for popular styles to move from the drawing board to the manufacturing plant and into a store, with the styles being somewhat out-of-date by the final step. Women found their choices limited to cloaks, capes, robes, loose-fitting dresses and other items that did not require personal tailoring. Other available items included shawls, collars, bonnets, undersleeves, boots and hoopskirts.<sup>19</sup> Despite these drawbacks, Edgerton welcomed these dresses because they

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>19</sup> Sally Helverston, *Feminine Response to a Frontier Environment as Reflected in the Clothing of Kansas Women, 1854-1895* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Kansas State University, 1985), 12 and Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer*, 297. See also Helverston’s article “Fashion on the Frontier” in *Dress* 17 (1990), page 146 for more information regarding manufactured clothing.

allowed her to feel a little less uncivilized in her rustic Bannack log cabin.

The shawl Edgerton writes of may have been a paisley shawl. Unlike a lace or silk style, paisley shawls were fashionable as well as practical. This style was regarded by many as “the epitome of elegance” for most of the nineteenth-century. Produced on a jacquard loom by English and Scottish weavers, Paisley shawls cost a fraction of their inspiration, the original hand-woven Kashmir shawl. Western women favored shawls because they often “added the only touch of decoration to an otherwise plain ensemble.” Frontier women favored shawls over other outdoor wraps because they could easily be worn over the large bell skirts of this period. In a period when the Edgerton women lived such vastly different lives, a gift such as this extended a bit of gentility from Ohio of Montana territory.<sup>20</sup>

Besides allowing Mary Edgerton to create an eastern-like atmosphere in Bannack, this correspondence also enabled Edgerton to remain current with eastern fashion trends. Unlike some of the other women of this study, Edgerton never referred to nineteenth-century fashion periodicals such as *Godey's* or *Peterson's*. It seems that Edgerton's only source regarding contemporary fashion came from her sister's letters. Edgerton's letters indicate both a lack of knowledge regarding eastern trends and a dependence on her sister for this information.

In the previously mentioned letter of 31 July 1864 Edgerton writes: “The ‘girls’ hats are the oddest-looking hats I ever saw. I presume you wrote how to trim them, but the letter[s] are back in that other trunk.” It was not strange for Edgerton's sister to send

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<sup>20</sup> For more information regarding the wearing of shawls in the West, see Mill's *Calico Chronicle*, 47. The information regarding fashion as an emotional linkage came from Helvenston, “Fashion on the Frontier,” 144.

her basic straw hats because eastern middle-class women often purchased plain hats and trimmings and then proceeded to trim their hats themselves. Women often updated older hats by “adding to, subtracting from or completely renewing the trim.” Although Edgerton was aware of trimming fads that preceded her trip West, she did not want to fashion her daughters’ hats using these styles. Doing so would have marked the hats as outdated, reminding Edgerton of her status as a settler in the hinterlands. Drawing on her sister’s knowledge enabled Edgerton to remain fashionable despite her circumstances, and thus, feel a little less out-of-place.<sup>21</sup>

As the 1860s became the 1870s, fashion, along with Montana’s character underwent a subtle transformation. The widespread availability of the sewing machine made even the most elaborate costumes available to more women. This decade also marked the beginning of Montana’s journey from a ragged collection of mining camps and cattle ranches to eventual statehood. By the end of the decade, women’s dress had undergone a profound revolution, and Montana had achieved statehood. Yet, despite these changes, many Montana female settlers continued to sew by hand, and remained isolated from friends and family.

Newlywed Mary Jane Jones Lewis came to southeastern Montana in the summer of 1888 with trunks full of cloth, fashion magazines, and other assorted sewing implements. Her luggage also contained straw hats, calico dresses, and the emotional baggage of leaving her family for a new home. During the initial months of settlement and marriage, Lewis found herself confronted with physical isolation, primitive housing,

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<sup>21</sup> Edgerton, *A Governor’s Wife*, 91, and Colin McDowell, *Hats: Status, Style and Glamour* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992), 146.

and irregular access to stores. Life on a Montana sheep ranch was about as far as Lewis could get from her life in upstate New York. Rather than giving into the loneliness and homesickness, Lewis used her talents as a seamstress to recreate a bit of civilization on the Montana plains.

One of Lewis's early sewing projects consisted of an afternoon dress. In a letter dated 6 December 1888, Lewis depicted this garment as "very plain, only a pleated waist and skirt with velvet cuffs and collar." Lewis's description did not refer to the color or pattern of this cloth. However, she intended to send a scrap to her sister. Instead, Lewis chose to comment on the price of cloth in Montana. The fabric she used for her afternoon dress cost 12 1/2 cents, which Lewis thought to be rather expensive for a calico. Yet, she appeared to feel that "this dress would be cheap to wear everyday."<sup>22</sup>

Lewis's use of the term afternoon dress refers to a type of garment worn only during a specific part of the day. The pleated waist depicted by Lewis appears to be similar to the long, box pleated skirt that came into style in 1888. Daytime and walking dresses similar to Lewis's featured this type of skirt, which "hung straight, not flared," rising "to a band of flat folds high across the belly, with the outer edges pleated into the waistband." This dress's bodice would have extended to just below the waist and featured a high neck with a collar that reached the chin and fastened up the front.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Jane Jones Lewis to her sister, 8 December 1888, in the Mary Jane Jones Lewis Small Collection 1918, Montana Historical Archives, Helena Montana. Hereafter cited as Lewis correspondence, MHA. I believe this price refers to what she paid per yard.

<sup>23</sup> Information regarding the boxed pleated skirt and bodice came from Severa, *Dressed*, 379; Joyce Marie Larson, "Clothing of Pioneer Women of Dakota Territory, 1861-1889" (MA Thesis, South Dakota State University, 1978), 98; and Grimble, *After a Fashion*, 37. The information regarding the wearing of multiple dresses in a day came from Kristina Harris, *Victorian and Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*, (Hong Kong: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1995), 45.

An afternoon dress such as these would have featured a narrow silhouette, with little or no fullness provided by petticoats. These costumes placed the emphasis on the elongated vertical line created by wearing a corset. Skirts also continued to feature bustles, although Lewis does not mention one in her correspondence, which added bulk that interfered with movement.<sup>24</sup> Along with the velvet collar and cuffs, a dress such as this would have been impractical on the dusty Montana prairie. While it may have conformed to contemporary eastern fashion, it would have been hard to keep clean and worn only when circumstances warranted. The question remains, why would Mary Lewis devote time, energy, and expense to making a dress that that did not suit her physical surroundings, and not to something more practical such as a split skirt or the bloomer costume?

Despite living in a primitive log cabin, far from friends and family, Lewis thought it important to remain as civilized as possible. For her, continuing to wear fashionable clothing was the same as remaining civilized.<sup>25</sup> Lewis coped with the harsh conditions of her Howard homestead by donning clothing, that, while impractical, allowed her to overcome Montana's uncivilized nature.

For as long as Mary Lewis lived in Howard, she continued to sew clothing that conformed to eastern fashion trends. As styles shifted from the corsets, skirts and bodices of the 1880s to the bell-like skirt silhouette, with its emphasis on the large shoulders and

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<sup>24</sup> Severa, 376.

<sup>25</sup> This linkage of fashion and civilization comes from Brenda M. Brandt, "Arizona Clothing: A Frontier Perspective" *Dress* 15 1989 (65-78). Although Brandt's study applies to Arizona women, women throughout the West faced the same problems concerning fashion and the environment.

hips of the 1890s, Lewis's sewing reflected this transition as well.<sup>26</sup> Despite her lack of regular contact with the East, Lewis managed to remain current with her subscriptions to *The Ladies Home Journal* and *The Ladies Home Companion* and through correspondence with her sister. These letters not only contained fashion advice, but also scraps of fabric and patterns, permitting Lewis to update her wardrobe as fashion demanded. Lewis appears, particularly during the early years, to have sewed garments that fashion critics deemed necessary. By her own accord, Lewis owned "so many [dresses] now I don't never wear and [are] good as new," meaning the majority of her wardrobe went unworn because garments such as a cashmere riding habit and a challie summer dress were impractical for her circumstances.<sup>27</sup>

In the course of sewing stylish clothing, Lewis learned how to create these costumes without the aid of a seamstress or dressmaker. These professionals not only kept up with fashion, but were experts at fitting clothing, with a dressmaker excelling at finding the perfect fit.<sup>28</sup> Without help, Lewis probably learned through trial and error how to find the perfect fit for herself, a fact she notes in several letters. Yet, despite these limitations, Lewis still created stylish garments such as the gray calico dress she describes in letter dated 4 September 1892.

Lewis begins her description of her newest sewing project with a brief commentary on her sister's dresses before detailing the progress of her own sewing. She writes: "I have just finished with [a] baskqur [basque] and skirt and black ribbon sewed on [the] waist . . . it is only 35 [cents] per yd 50 in wide and only took 4 yards . I sent to

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<sup>26</sup> Harris, *Victorian and Edwardian*, 85 and 102 and Grimble, *After a Fashion*, 42.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Lewis to her sister, Lewis correspondence 1 October 1893, MHS.

<sup>28</sup> Severa, *Dressed*, 191.

Chicago for it.” The term *basque*, or the jacket-style bodice, refers to a fitted bodice with a short, hip-length flared skirt, popular during the late-nineteenth century. Women typically wore this garment with a separate skirt and overskirt, rather than with a one-piece dress. It usually fastened down the front with several large prominent buttons. During the early 1890s, the *basque* extended several inches beyond the waist at the sides and back, giving women a long-waisted look. It was not unusual for women to trim these tops with ribbon, as Lewis did with her *basque*.<sup>29</sup> Selection of this narrow silhouette indicates that Lewis made a conscious effort to remain fashionable, regardless of her circumstances. A heavily constricted bodice such as the *basque* would have been appropriate to wear when receiving callers, but it was not conducive to performing the strenuous household tasks required by ranch life.

This letter also depicts Lewis’s efforts to sew several waists for herself. With the aid of Butterick waist and skirt patterns, Lewis was able to sew waists which featured “a long *basque* [*basque*] back,” which could also be made as short as she wished. In the course of this project, Lewis “fixed over one [waist], made [herself] a new black one, a muslin and this gray one, this summer.” The waists that Lewis spoke of were blouses that first appeared in the 1860s, but not accepted for general wear until the early 1890s. Women usually tucked waists into the waistband, and finished with a wide, fabric belt. In keeping with 1890s trends, the shoulders were cut very narrow, with the cut widening along the upper arms. Waists not only came in numerous colors, but also shifted in design as different bodice and sleeve styles came into fashion. As a result, women could

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<sup>29</sup>Lewis Correspondence, 4 September 1892, MHS. Information regarding the *basque* came from Severa, *Dressed*, 541 and Linda Setnik, *Victorian Costume for Ladies, 1860-1900* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2000), 73, 118, and 133.



easily alter their blouses to fit contemporary trends.<sup>30</sup>

Mary Lewis probably chose the shirt waist because it was both practical and stylish. Unlike other styles, such as the bustle or the heavily corseted styles of the 1870s and 1880s, the shirt waist allowed ease of movement. This style, with its two separate pieces, allowed women more flexibility in choosing their outfits. One example includes the pairing of a black silk shirt waist with a skirt of an equally luxurious fabric to wear while making afternoon calls and then at some sort of evening event. Yet, according to her letters, due to distance and chores, Lewis rarely possessed an opportunity to socialize. She surely did not wear nice clothing such as this while washing clothes or working in her garden, but her letters do not mention any other clothing.

Lewis does not mention other clothing because doing so would be admitting that she had ceased to be civilized. Abandoning her long skirts and velvet cuffs for something more practical would have also translated into a loss of femininity. For Mary Lewis, donning of fashionable clothing meant more than a link to civilization and her feminine nature, but a means of identity as well. Although she omits references to “work” clothes, Lewis probably shied away from wearing them because this would have represented a shift in a identity. Mary Lewis coped with her circumstances by managing her identity, that of a civilized and fashionable women. Any slip in this persona might have indicated that Lewis may not be dealing with this situation as well as she would have liked. Only by establishing an eastern atmosphere in Montana, could Lewis exert some control over her situation, as well remaining civilized according to eastern standards.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. See Severa 456-57 and Setnik 143 for a more complete description of the shirt waist.

Living near Livingston at roughly the same time, Alvie Nave Kaiser responded to her circumstances in a manner similar to Mary Wright Edgerton and Mary Jane Jones Lewis: she remained fashion conscious despite her circumstances. Like the other women of this study, Kaiser left friends and family to live on her husband's ranch, located near Myresberg, in south central Montana. However, instead of living on a remote ranch, Kaiser lived near friends and family. Kaiser's family lived near Helena, and her sister-in-law, Emma, stayed with Alvie during the first few months of her marriage. Regardless of the proximity of neighbors and family, Kaiser still faced many of the same problems as other female Montana settlers. Although she did not reside in a remote location, Kaiser lived by herself for an extended period of time, while her husband sought work elsewhere. Edward Kaiser's absences necessitated Alvie taking on farm chores that fell beyond the scope of her domestic duties.<sup>31</sup> To deal with these situations, and many others, Kaiser looked to her sewing as a way to retain an element of gentility despite the extension of her realm.

Unlike Mary Lewis's letters, which described her sewing projects in detail, Kaiser's diary provides little information pertaining to either her living environment or her coping strategies. Yet, through careful reading and the use of secondary sources, a more complete picture of Kaiser's life emerges from her brief (often one-line) descriptions.<sup>32</sup> Much of Kaiser's sewing appears to take place when her husband was absent from the ranch or ill. As detailed by Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell in

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<sup>31</sup> From the diary of Alvie Nave Kaiser, SC 1488, Montana Historical Archives, Helena MT. Hereafter cited as Kaiser diary, MHS, Helena.

<sup>32</sup> In filling out Kaiser's diary entries, I consulted Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) as a sort of how-to for undertaking this process.

their 1975 essay, pioneer women who performed male-orientated tasks felt disoriented and reached for traditional female chores as a way to restore order. Perhaps Kaiser, when confronted with the threat of assuming her husband's chores, looked for ways to restore order to her world as well.<sup>33</sup>

The first occasion ( 28 May 1890) took place within the first months of her marriage, which also corresponded to Kaiser's residence on the ranch, when Edward left to pursue some runaway horses. Alvie apparently spent the better part of Eddie's absence "sew[ing] on a gingham dress." Prior to May 28, Kaiser's diary contains no references to sewing of any kind. Although Eddie was only gone for a few days, it appears that his absence bothered Alvie to such a degree that she engaged in sewing as a way to reinforce her feminine identity.<sup>34</sup>

While Kaiser fails to describe her dress beyond the type of fabric used, her diary is not entirely bereft of details regarding this garment. Due to her apparent lack of eastern relatives and periodicals, Kaiser may not have been as well-informed regarding contemporary fashion styles as other women. Without a direct link to eastern fashions, it took much longer for contemporary styles to reach isolated areas such as Montana. Passage of secondhand fashion news via a network of informal sources delayed the arrival of European high fashion in the northwestern United States by a year to two years.<sup>35</sup> Kaiser most likely was not sewing a dress of the latest fashion, but one from the late 1880s.

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<sup>33</sup> Kaiser Diary, MHS, Helena.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Helvenston, "Feminine Response," 13. For more information regarding the diffusion of fashion trends, see Margaret Lambert, "Women's Costume in Northwest America during the 1890's with a Time-Lag Study of Fashion Diffusion." (MA Thesis: University of Washington, 1978).

Styles of the late 1880s and early 1890s were marked by a simplicity missing from previous decades. An easing in clothing constraints, combined with a demand for plain, functional, affordable, and easy-to-make dresses, led to new dress styles. While a plain housedress was not the most stylish garment, it served a variety of Kaiser's needs. Kaiser's use of gingham, "a plain weave cotton fabric, woven with dyed yarns into checks and stripes," was both practical and somewhat fashionable. This act seems to have reinforced Kaiser's feminine identity as she witnessed the addition of ranch chores.<sup>36</sup>

Additional threats to her gentility occurred when Eddie fell ill. Although Kaiser's diary fails to note a specific illness, it could not have been too serious if Eddie was able to fix a crossing. Kaiser's entry of July 22, records that "Eddie is still sick, but stacks hay in the afternoon. I sew on my cloak and iron." While her diary lacks references to Kaiser taking on additional chores, it seems likely that she helped her husband. Again, Alvie only mentioned her sewing projects when her familiar world of housekeeping shifted to one that included tasks that conflicted with her ideas of civilized female behavior. Sewing provided Kaiser with reassurance that regardless of her work activities, she still fit nineteenth-century ideas regarding proper female behavior.<sup>37</sup>

As with her gingham dress, Kaiser provides little information regarding her cloak. Unlike the dress, which may have been of an older style, the cloak could have been of a more recent design. While women wore cloaks prior to the 1890s, they appear not to have become a major component of women's wardrobes until this point. Cloaks of this

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<sup>36</sup> Severa, *Dressed*, 454-455; and Henrietta Spencer-Churchill, *Classic Fabrics* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 185.

<sup>37</sup> Kaiser diary, MHS, Helena. She does not specify what type of crossing Eddie was repairing. Since they lived near a stream or small river, I assume this reference refers to a river crossing of some sort.

period were usually long, and made from either black or shot velvet, or plush or *velour du nord*.<sup>38</sup> Kaiser most likely chose a cloak over a coat or jacket because of its versatility. Unlike other wraps, whose sleeves had to be adjusted as sleeve styles changed, the cloak's cut not only remained the same but easily accommodated dress sleeves as well.

This pattern of naming specific sewing projects continued during Eddie Kaiser's extended stay in Judith. Although Alvie neglected to record why Eddie spent five weeks away from their ranch, she noted how much she missed her husband. Throughout this period, Alvie not only began sewing several dresses, but also absorbed many of her husband's outside chores. Kaiser also noted "learning to shoot the shot gun," and going "around the pasture fixing fence" during this period. These activities, combined with Eddie's prolonged absence, created a need in Kaiser to establish physical reminders of a familiar and civilized environment: that of the domestic sphere.<sup>39</sup>

During this period Kaiser decided to rip up an old black dress, rather than making a new one. Re-making a dress represented a positive challenge in that women looked for ways to give their dresses a fresh look, while increasing its size. Women created larger dresses by letting out pleats, loosening gathers, extending the waistband and the bodice opening. The alterations needed to update a dress usually depended on current styles. Techniques included bringing up or lowering the waistline, redesigning the sleeves, and adding new trim. Unlike some of her other endeavors, this project appears to occupy Kaiser for several months beyond the return of her husband. Based on entries such as "I am ripping up my old black dress," I assume Kaiser's aim consists of expansion, rather

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<sup>38</sup> Severa, *Dressed*, 465.

<sup>39</sup> Kaiser Diary, MHS, Helena. Kaiser's diary only refers to Eddie Kaiser's destination as Judith. I assume by this, she is referring to the Judith Basin area in central Montana.

than merely giving it a fresh look. While she hoped “to get it done for the Thanksgiving dance,” it seems this task continued into mid-December.<sup>40</sup>

As Kaiser progressed in re-making this black dress, she appears to grow tired of this project. Whether this is due its length, or the amount of sewing required, Kaiser neglected to explain her frustration when she wrote on December 2, “sewing on my black dress, I don’t believe I will ever get it done.” In a subsequent entries, Kaiser adds to these feelings by stating “I sew on that abominable black dress again today . . . . I am working on my - - - - - dress. . . . I am getting my dress on a fair road to a finish.” Despite her obvious dissatisfaction, Kaiser continues sewing because it offers her numerous emotional benefits. Besides reinforcing her domestic sphere, sewing fashionable clothing linked Kaiser with notions regarding propriety.<sup>41</sup>

Writing in a manner similar to Alvie Nave Kaiser, Lucy Jane Wagy Ramsay of Dillon, Montana provided barely any information, as well as little emotional content in her daily writings. Yet, as with Kaiser’s writings, Ramsay’s notes can be pieced together to create a fuller picture of her life. Born in Kansas on 26 March 1873, Ramsay moved first to Corvallis, Montana and later to Dillon in the spring of 1896. From Ramsay’s writings, it appears they moved to the Corvallis area because their relatives, Fanny and Nute, already lived in the area.

During their time in Dillon, Ramsay’s husband attended the Normal school in order to become a fully certified teacher. With her husband unable to work, Ramsay supplemented their income by taking in boarders. Although Ramsay lived in a

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<sup>40</sup> Mills, *Calico Chronicle*, 125 and Kaiser Diary, MHS, Helena.

<sup>41</sup> Kaiser Diary, MHS, Helena.

comfortable home and maintained a close circle of female friends, she missed her family. Sewing provided Ramsay a way to remain civilized despite her forays into the world of commercial transactions.<sup>42</sup>

Like Elizabeth Chester Fisk, Ramsay lived in a well-settled community that contained shops, schools, churches and numerous social clubs. While Ramsay participated in church and other social activities, she devoted most of her time to her home. Even though a large part of her housework revolved around her boarders, Ramsay found time to sew numerous dresses, wrappers, and aprons for herself. Like the women profiled in Faragher and Stansell's essay and Alvie Kaiser, Ramsay seems to have used fashion to reinforce her feminine sphere. Fortification of this realm represented a connection to well-established eastern behavioral norms.

Unlike other Montana women, Ramsay's living circumstances permitted her to buy cloth whenever the need arose. Ramsay's diary contains copious references to going "downtown after dinner & getting me a calico dress & some other things." By this, Ramsay did not mean she went and bought herself a pre-made dress, but that she purchased the fabric with which she used to make a dress. Although her entries contain little information regarding style, it appears that Ramsay followed eastern trends as closely as time, finances and available materials allowed. In an entry dated 16 September 1898, Ramsay writes, "I cut out a waist for myself & partly made it." Despite the popularity of the Gibson Girl tailored suit, waists continued to be an integral component

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<sup>42</sup> From the diary of Lucy Jane Waggy Ramsay (*New Canaan, Conn.: American Women's Diaries (Western) Readex Microprint*). Hereafter cited as Ramsay diary. Although Ramsay neglects to explain her relationship to Fanny and Nute, I assume they are relatives because Ramsay uses their first names in her diary. For other individuals, Ramsay did not use their first name, but rather their title—Miss Smith or Mr. Davis.

of women's wardrobes. In the late 1890s, the waist came in variety of assorted prints and colors that contrasted with the accompanying skirt. A waist could be embellished with yokes, tucks, flounces and fastened at the front or the side. While Ramsay fails to describe her waist, she most likely chose a simple design because of time constraints.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to sewing shirt waists and skirts, Ramsay also made more utilitarian items such as aprons and wrappers. A garment such as the wrapper was not only a useful garment; it was comfortable as well. Its basic design consisted of a long cover-up, with a high neck, long sleeves and a full, flowing body. Unlike the dress, a wrapper "required no bustles, hoops or corsets, was relatively easy to make, and was practical for active women."<sup>44</sup>

Ramsay may have donned this garment while cleaning her house or worn a more formal style when receiving callers. As with her other sewing endeavors, her diary contains little information regarding her wrapper. Using the clues Ramsay provides, one can reasonably reconstruct the wrapper's appearance. On 2 August 1898 Ramsay "went downtown after dinner & got me a calico dress & some other things. I cut out my dress in the P.M.," which was followed by an entry on the August 3: "I sewed all day on my wrapper." Based on Ramsay's writings, it appears that she meant to use the calico she purchased on August 2 to sew her wrapper. It was not unusual for a wrapper to be made from calico, especially if the garment was meant for everyday wear. If she had been sewing a wrapper to wear on a more formal occasion, it would have been made from

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<sup>43</sup> Ramsay diary, and Setnik, *Victorian Costume*, 152.

<sup>44</sup> Mills, *Calico Chronicle*, 61 and 65.



printed percale, dotted lawn, wool challis, silk, alpaca, cashmere or bengaline.<sup>45</sup>

Ramsay's other main sewing project appears to have consisted of making aprons. Throughout her diary, she records sewing numerous aprons for herself. On 27 August 1895, Ramsay recorded that "Clara [her sister] and I made up an apron apiece." As with her other entries, this one contains little information beyond a basic description of day's activities. Using preceding notations, one can assume she used calico purchased on a shopping expedition to sew an apron. In fact, Ramsay never refers to any other type of fabric, leading me to believe this may have been the only cloth she used. Compared to other, more luxuriant fabrics, calico was relatively affordable, as well as durable.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike other sewing endeavors, aprons served a utilitarian purpose. While many apron styles existed, it appears that Ramsay's aprons were meant mainly for everyday wear. Ramsay's apron was practical in nature, women could trim them to suit their taste and desire. Although Ramsay only mentions that she sewed an apron, and not its actual design, it is not unreasonable to assume that she added some decoration to this garment. Due to her presumably limited budget and needs, the trim could not have been too ostentatious, but just enough to brighten her day. Regardless of its purpose, donning a drab apron might have indicated that Ramsay did nothing but work, with little time or interest for the more civilized aspects of life. A trimmed apron would have pointed to Ramsay's status as a civilized women, instead of an overworked and coarse drudge.<sup>47</sup>

For Montana women, sewing not only served a practical purpose, it also allowed them to create an emotional environment that appeared to be less hostile to their

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<sup>45</sup> Ramsay diary and Mills, *Calico Chronicle*, 62 and 65.

<sup>46</sup> Ramsay diary.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Anne Dolan, *Vintage Clothing, 1880-1980* (Florence AL: Books American, Inc, 1995), 3.

femininity. In our twenty-first century eyes, it seems impractical and a bit odd that women continued to don long skirts and tightly laced corsets in circumstances that demanded more physically from them. Yet, women such as Lucy Ramsay and Mary Wright Edgerton took a great deal of emotional comfort from the fact that their wardrobes paralleled those of their eastern sisters. These often extensive collections not only reinforced their feminine persona, but also enabled women like Mary Lewis and Alvie Kaiser to exert some control over circumstances that threatened to overwhelm them at any time.

## Conclusion

Women who settled in nineteenth-century Montana faced a host of trying challenges: an unfamiliar environmental setting, unsuitable housing, separation from their families, few female companions, and a domestic sphere that contained masculine chores. In their letters, diaries and reminiscences many female settlers described missing family gatherings, favorite local delicacies, and special relatives. Many female settlers coped with this distress by replicating as closely as possible the living spaces and clothing of mainstream American culture. Transporting familiar objects westward and dressing in customary clothing enabled these middle-class settlers to create a sense of place that replicated their former surroundings. Montana women manipulated their surroundings in such a way as to meet their emotional needs. Although they created this sense by imitating eastern homes and fashions, by doing so they claimed these mining towns and homesteads as their own.

For many of the women of this paper, western domesticity seems to have been a useful strategy for psychological coping. While not physically practical, western domesticity was emotionally practical. Domesticity permitted women not only to cope with their lives, but to make sense of their lives as well. Domesticity provided these female settlers with an identity that their new lives did not make available readily—that of a proper middle-class woman. Living in a dugout and hunting wildlife were situations that stripped these women of their feminine qualities. Recreation of the cult of

domesticity, even in its modified state, enabled Montana women to retain those qualities that shaped their worlds and helped them to process their lives. At the same time, its establishment of women's authority within the home permitted women to assert a voice within their homes. The cult of domesticity not only gave women influence within their homes, but it endowed them with the authority to establish female-centered spheres in these situations.

Yet, not every Montana woman coped in this manner, or utilized domesticity in this way. A notable exception was Evelyn Cameron, who resided in the Miles City area. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Cameron chose not to embrace an overtly domestic persona, but she too, found ways to cope with her especially rugged life. Cameron coped by entering the world of commerce by selling vegetables, taking photographs and catering to the English aristocrats who stayed at Eve Ranch. While she adopted a more masculine lifestyle, Cameron participated in the English aristocratic colony that had sprung up in eastern Montana. Although her coping style deviated somewhat from those discussed in this paper, interaction with other aristocrats allowed Cameron to embrace the genteel and civilized behaviors of other Montana women.<sup>1</sup> Just as their actions helped the women profiled in this thesis, Cameron's behaviors also allowed to her to recreate a sense of home on the Montana plains.

The documents I used in this study only cover a small part of women's lives in

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<sup>1</sup> See Donna M. Lucey's *Photographing Montana 1894-1928: The Life and Work of Evelyn Cameron* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2001) for more information regarding Cameron's life in eastern Montana. My ideas concerning Cameron's coping mechanisms are more fully discussed in "Ranch Hands, Teachers and Photographers: Pioneer Women and Their Coping Skills," a paper I presented at the 2002 Graduate Student and Faculty Research Conference, 27 April 2002 at the University of Montana-Missoula.

Montana. However, it appears that many women utilized western domesticity as a coping structure throughout their time in Montana. For those like Mary Wright Edgerton, who only lived in Bannack for a few years and never really settled in, domestic pursuits constituted a significant portion of their lives throughout their time in the state. Those who lived the rest of their lives here, appear to have persisted in their fashioning of suitable living environments. Yet, as in the case of Mary Jane Jones Lewis, concerns outside of her domestic realm seem to have taken precedence later in her life. Until her death, following the birth of her fourth daughter in 1899, Mary Lewis continued to describe her efforts to manipulate her living space. Although topics such as raising chickens and gardening came to dominate later letters, domestic efforts popped up every so often.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Lewis ceased to discuss domesticity does not mean that Lewis abandoned this ideology in favor of a less-culturally structured one. Domesticity did not disappear from her life, but Lewis simply did not focus on domesticity with the same intensity as she once did.

But does this pattern fit all nineteenth-century Montana women? Individual circumstances more than anything else probably influenced the duration of women's focus on their domestic endeavors. Urban women like Lucy Jane Waggy Ramsay and Elizabeth Chester Fisk, who avoided widening their spheres to include as many farm or business-oriented activities, possibly adhered to the cult of domesticity for a longer time. Their duties and responsibilities, having continued to follow a more traditional course, tied urban women more closely to domestic doctrine than their rural counterparts. It was

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Templeton Haight, "I am lonely here all alone . . .," ed. Rick Newby *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 35 (Summer 1985): 78. Also see Lewis correspondence dated 7 July 1896, Small Collection 1918, Montana Historical Archives, Helena MT.

not that female homesteaders chose to depart from this ideology; rather their lives moved them away from it and in that they were being practical.

Women's choice and the duration of their coping mechanism had consequences that extended beyond their adjustment to and happiness with their living situations. Even though the women's rights movement began in New England, it was in western territories and states that women gained their first significant victories. The American West was the first region to extend suffrage to women (Wyoming in 1869), to allow women to practice law (Montana in 1889), and to permit women to hold offices and serve on juries (Wyoming). Additionally, in a major departure from the English common law that composed most eastern property law, many western states enacted legislation that allowed women to purchase or homestead land, and own or operate businesses as individuals.<sup>3</sup> And in Mormon Utah, territorial and state law made women-initiated divorce surprisingly easy. How do we reconcile this image of the West with one in which women remained committed to their domestic duties?

Sandra L. Myres, Julie Roy Jeffrey and other historians would claim that women viewed reform and suffrage activities as an acceptable extension of the cult of domesticity. Regarding this matter, Myres states "there was no reason that they could not participate in politics without becoming less feminine or less attentive to domestic duties."<sup>4</sup> The answer to this paradox lies in the fact that the women's suffrage and other

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<sup>3</sup> Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 213 and 258; Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 188-189.

<sup>4</sup> Myres, *Westering Women*, 235. See also Virginia Scharff's *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) for more information regarding women's suffrage in Wyoming.

reform movements sprang up *after* western women acclimated to their new lives. Once they felt secure in the strength of their domestic personae, these women extended their realm to include activities that might signal a potential loss of this identity.

While some historians maintain that it was the daughters of the original settlers who fought for female suffrage, Paula Petrik, author of *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana 1865-1900* (1987), posits that the first generation of female settlers worked just as hard for enfranchisement. According to her argument, that while frontier conditions created a further modification in the successive generations of frontier daughters, they also influenced first generation female settlers' views of themselves and "undercut conventional nineteenth century definitions of women's proper sphere." Petrik argues that the cult of domesticity, as it developed in the West, permitted frontier mothers to adapt this mindset to include women's suffrage. She states that it took "the accumulation of these generations of like-minded women" to produce sufficient numbers for a campaign of subtle urging to be effective as a political tool.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the women discussed in this paper did not participate in nineteenth-century reform movements. The one woman, Elizabeth Chester Fisk, who participated in Helena's political scene, did not express a loss of her domestic self. Despite these added activities, she continued to fashion socially acceptable homes and garments for herself. Her documents seem to indicate that she was secure in who she was, that having a life

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<sup>5</sup> Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana 1865-1900* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1987), 116.

outside her home was within acceptable limits of feminine behavior.<sup>6</sup>

Reading women's diaries and other personal documents not only introduced me to a feminine world of sewing and fashion, but to additional domestic arts such as quilting, rug braiding, and netting as well. These topics figured just as prominently as discussions regarding curtains and sleeve size in the letters and reminisces of Montana inhabitants. In some ways, it was easier to obtain the supplies needed to sew a quilt or braid a rug because women usually utilized fabric scraps and old rags in these projects. These materials, more so than furniture or dresses, linked women to their previous home and to the memories that brought them comfort. Due to a lack of time, this area went unexplored. Perhaps in a future project, I will find the time and space to include women's domestic arts.

In the course of my studies, I have often been asked some rather interesting and occasionally stupid questions regarding my thesis. Most people, particularly women, expressed an unexpected interest and excitement in my work that alternately surprised and bemused me. On numerous occasions, they regaled me with stories regarding their grandmother's and great-grandmother's homesteading experiences. Some of my grandmother's friends even recounted their childhood experiences in the Flathead Valley during the early twentieth-century, or on the Montana Hi-Line in the 1920s. During these impromptu oral interviews, they remembered their mothers undertaking the same sort of tasks I discuss in this paper. These little old ladies (literally, I practically tower over some of them), not only supported my thesis but encouraged me as well. I think they

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<sup>6</sup> See the Fisk Family Papers, Manuscript Collection 31, Montana Historical Society, Helena MT for Fisk's letters regarding her involvement in the WCTU and female suffrage activities.



were thrilled that someone was finally depicting their foremothers as something other than tired, prematurely aged women, bowed down by endless work, who found little or no joy in their lives.

By shining a light on several early Montana women, I hope that I have knocked down one more set of stereotypes and false characterizations that have plagued female homesteaders for several generations. These women deserve to be remembered in the same light as their male counterparts, not as the weaker partner, but as individuals who worked as hard as their husbands to establish successful homes in Montana.

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