Workin’ Nine to Five in the West?: Western Women Workers, 1865-1940

In her autobiography, entitled *A Bride Goes West*, which was co-authored by Helena Huntington Smith, Nannie T. Alderson makes an assertion regarding the way women were treated in the West with respect to work outside the home. When she was sixteen years old, she stated, “A new world opened up before me,” when she was invited to visit her aunt in Atchison, Kansas, which she considered the West. She quickly found that she liked the West and that “it didn’t matter a bit…what you did for a living.” This assertion that it did not matter what you did for a living apparently extended to women, as Alderson further stated, “What impressed me most was the fact that a girl could work in an office or store…this freedom to work seemed to me a wonderful thing.”¹ This statement by Alderson provides the basis for an interesting case study. Were the opportunities for women in the West radically different from those that they would have back East? In spite of her assertion, it is apparent from many diaries of women living in the American West during the early days of civilized living on the frontier and other writings on the period from about the end of the Civil War to the outbreak of World War II that women were still largely limited in the types of work that they were both permitted and expected to perform.

Much of Alderson’s life story, as given in *A Bride Goes West*, deals with her many difficulties living on the open range in Montana. During this period in her life, she

was involved mainly in what would be considered woman’s work, such as cooking, cleaning, laundering, and mothering. This was in spite of the fact that she arrived on the frontier knowing nothing about this type of work, as she had previously lived in relative luxury in West Virginia.

Alderson’s account is not the only one from which we can obtain information on the working conditions of women on the frontier, including what types of work they were involved in. Before continuing with this study, a definition of “work” is in order. As far as census takers of the day were concerned, a man or woman was considered gainfully employed “if they earned a direct income (such as a farmer did) or a cash wage (such as a factory worker might)...If a person earned a wage, he or she worked.” If money was not earned, a person was not considered to be working. This is part of the reason that women were listed as being employed nearly as much as men. For one example, the 1870 census showed that the workforce in the Dakotas had only 160 working women, compared to 5,727 working men. Of course, part of this is due to the relative lack of women on the frontier. Regardless, some of those who were excluded from this figure were women who worked on the farm or ranch as wives and mothers. For the purpose of this research, working women are considered those working outside the home.

Of those women who did work outside of the home, the question remains: What type of work was available to them and was it vastly different from that available to those in the East? The stereotypical woman working outside the home from the last half of the nineteenth century through around World War II would have been employed as a teacher,

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3 Ibid., 168.
nurse, or domestic laborer. The occupations listed above would have been common in both the eastern and western United States. While this list is obviously not all-inclusive, it nevertheless contains a broad overview of what types of employment working women were involved in.

In addition to the fields of education, nursing, and domestic labor, many western women who worked outside the home would have been involved in what has been termed the “world’s oldest profession”. In fact, in 1885 and 1886, prostitution was the most common profession for women working outside the home in Helena, Montana. In many cattle towns on the frontier, the prostitutes came and went with the cattle shipping season. Although there was widespread prostitution in the West, it was by no means an exclusively western occupation, and it would definitely not have been considered a proper occupation for a woman.

A good example of a western woman who was a domestic laborer is given in the published diary *Emily: The Diary of a Hard-Worked Woman*. In 1890, Emily French, a recent divorcee with children, kept this diary detailing her employment as a domestic helper who was involved in such tasks as washing clothes and cleaning houses in the Denver, Colorado, area. These tasks would have been perceived as menial, both at that time and today. This type of work was not easy. Domestic labor in the nineteenth century was more difficult due to the lack of such modern conveniences as dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, and automatic washing machines. On August 25, 1890, French described herself as “a hard worked woman.” On August 30, she wrote that she was “so

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very tired I don't feel as if I could get up.”

A busy, although not uncommon day was depicted on May 12, as Emily tells of her work for that day: “Cleaned for Mrs Sorrel, her middle room, took up the carpet, turned and sewed it, cleaned the windows, all looks so nice. I got her washing, 45 pieces, a tub small, some tins, went got the horse to bring them.”

From this, it can be gathered that the life of a domestic worker was extremely difficult. French probably would have wanted to do something else, but for a woman at the time little else would have been available considering her status as a relatively uneducated divorcee.

Perhaps finding out what types of work women who were able to decide their occupation attempted to obtain would be more telling as to how open the workforce was for women, rather than looking at the story of a divorcée who was forced to accept whatever type of work was available. In her diary kept during the Great Depression, Ann Marie Low tells the type of work into which she went. In September 1930, she and her sister Ethel enrolled in Jamestown College in North Dakota.

Something very telling is the fact that she decided to go into the teaching profession. In addition, her sister Ethel, after attending several different colleges and taking sabbaticals to decide where to go next; also went into the teaching profession. Low’s brother Bud had no such problem of being boxed into a profession. When the time to go to college came, he received a scholarship to Jamestown College, but did not go there because it had no engineering

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5 Emily French, edited by Janet Lecompte, *Emily: The Diary of a Hard-Worked Woman* (Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 96-97. Please note that quotes from this work are recorded as written in the text. Any errors in spelling or grammar are the author’s.

6 Ibid., 62.

7 Ann Marie Low, *Dust Bowl Diary* (Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 43.

8 Ibid., 157.
program. Instead he went to the agricultural college in Fargo, North Dakota.\textsuperscript{9} Apparently, men had more mobility and career choices even at this late date. Perhaps the most obvious hint that the job market was largely closed for women (especially married women) even as late as the eve of World War II appears in Low’s epilogue. She states,

Even before the folks left the farm, I married Seth in spite of my rebellion against the social dictum of the time and place that the only career for a woman was marriage and a confining life of housework and raising children. Widows and single girls who had to support themselves might find work as store clerks, telephone operators, or, if lucky enough to have the education, as nurses, stenographers, or teachers. A married woman was not hired for those scarce jobs because she had a husband to support her.\textsuperscript{10}

In a collection of stories told by his mother Mary Jo, Jack Clark relays that she was employed in the mail order catalog business in Chicago during the 1930s. Although Chicago would not be considered “western” today, before World War II it would have for many people been considered the western edge of eastern civilization. Many major railroads had their terminus in Chicago, and the city was the farthest west (along with St. Louis) that had professional sports teams. Mrs. Clark was employed by Sears & Roebuck. However, not all women were employable by Sears’ standards. Clark tells the story of one of her friends who married one weekend in 1930 at the age of eighteen. “She came in on Monday to go to work. They called her into the main office and told her they were sorry, but they didn’t have married women at Sears, so she would have to leave.” Clark said that of two hundred women working her department, she did not remember any of them ever saying anything about their husbands.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 182.
\textsuperscript{11} Mary Jo Clark, \textit{On the Home Front} (New York: Plume, 2002), 58.
corrobates Low’s story that women, and especially married women, had many occupations closed to them until relatively recent times. This lack of available occupations largely applied to the West, as Low made clear.

One interesting thing about female occupations in the time period being discussed was the lack of respect given to even waitresses. Fred Harvey and his chain of Harvey House Restaurants along the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railway employed women as wait staff, beginning in the late 1800s. These restaurants stretched from Chicago to the West Coast, with several being located along stops in Kansas and Oklahoma. That women were employed as waitresses was somewhat of a scandal at the time, as there was “the suspicion in many communities that they [the Harvey Girls] were really prostitutes in disguise, or that they were not acceptable, not ‘nice girls,’ simply because they were waitresses.” This goes against the belief of Nannie Alderson that it did not matter what a woman did for a living as far as their social standing was concerned. A former Kingman, Arizona, Harvey Girl named Bernice Black McClain left home in 1926 to work on the railroad line for Harvey. She said that the “Harvey Girls…had a very good life, but a lot of us resented the way people in the community looked down on waitresses.”

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12 Lesley Poling-Kempes, *The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1991), xiii. It should be noted that Poling-Kempes refers several times to the Harvey Company’s policy of not hiring married women. This is in line with the accounts of Ann Marie Low and Mary Jo Clark. It should be noted that Harvey was considered a relatively progressive company by nineteenth century standards. Women were not only limited to being waitresses. Some women were able rise to positions in lower level management with the company. This was rare for the time period.

13 Alderson, 8.

14 Poling-Kempes, 124-125.
This threat to their social standing probably helped enforce the belief that many occupations were closed to women, or at least self-respecting women. Many women risked the possibility of being ostracized in the community by working for Harvey. However, many women took the chance because of the economic benefits and freedom that working provided. A former Harvey Girl named Ruthanna Walz told her story: “I really wanted to go to college, but in those days, there wasn’t the money to just go. The only other sort of job I could have found would have been as a housekeeper or babysitter, or as a switchboard operator.”

In looking at the account of the Harvey Girls, it is apparent that not only were there few lines of work open to women, the threat of sullying one’s reputation kept some women from those lines of work open to them.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that many women were exempted from field work on family farms. Glenda Riley, in her book Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825-1915, quotes a Swedish immigrant who wrote back to the mother country in 1860 that “the women never work in the fields—not even milking cows.” Another example of this is shown in the words of a German who during the 1820s traveled in a portion of the American frontier that Riley neglects to identify. This traveler wrote that “not even the poorest farmer allows his wife or daughter to work in the fields.” This lack of field work appears to be largely an American phenomena, as Riley quotes a Frenchman, “Country women in France work on the land and know how to do it almost as well as their husbands.”

In A Bride Goes West, Alderson shows this lack of field work to be largely true, although probably unintentionally. She is shown doing domestic tasks, and rarely, if

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15 Ibid., 180.

ever, going out to do field work on the ranch, although she did go for rides with her husband before her children were born.

A couple of immigrant tales do show women doing field work by the late eighteenth century, although many times this was due to the lack of men around to do the job. In her memoir entitled *Grass of the Earth*, Norwegian immigrant Aagot Raaen tells of pitching wheat bundles with her brother on a farm in an immigrant community in North Dakota. This was due to manpower shortage, as all of the possible hired hands had been hired out.\(^{17}\) It is also interesting that in spite of their experience doing men’s work, Raaen and her sister Kjersti wound up studying for occupations that are normally associated with women, that of teacher and nurse, respectively.

Sophie Trupin in her work *Dakota Diaspora* tells of working in the field on her father’s homestead in 1917. However, she also got her chance to do manual labor for pay when she was in the seventh grade. Trupin and her friend Sarah were hired to shock wheat. Trupin cannot remember exactly how long they worked, but she writes that the manager who hired them came to her father’s store after a week or two and paid them the same wage as the men, because they had “accomplished as much as any of the men.” This was somewhat shocking to the girls. This short-term employment opportunity was also due to a manpower shortage because many of the nation’s men were off fighting in World War I.\(^{18}\)


In spite of the somewhat widespread view that things in the American West were a great deal different from things in the East, the idea of women working outside the home was largely viewed in the same way in both the East and the West. Michael P. Malone and Richard W. Etulain, in their work *The American West: A Twentieth Century History* wrote regarding women and work in the Western context, “In work activities, as in most other facets of everyday life, women of the West seem very much in the national mainstream and therefore should be viewed in a nationwide context.”19 From the examples listed above, it can be shown that women in the American West from approximately 1865-1940 were generally expected to become wives and mothers rather than employees. Furthermore, many occupations were closed to women at this period of time and many women who did work were subjected to being viewed as only slightly above prostitutes on the social scale, much like the stories from the Harvey Girls. Some women who worked actually were prostitutes. For these reasons, Alderson’s assertion that women in the West could find work easier and work at whatever occupation they wanted could be viewed as largely invalid.

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19 Michael P. Malone and Richard W. Etulain, *The American West: A Twentieth Century History* (Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 159. Although there was little difference in many occupations between the eastern and western United States, one field that was more open to women in the West was politics. Jeanette Rankin from Montana was the first American congresswoman. In 1869, Wyoming became the first state to allow women the right to vote and Esther Hobart Morris of Wyoming became the nation’s first elected woman official. However, “political women” were still frowned upon by much of western society and many of the more well-known heroes of the women’s suffrage movement in Wyoming are some of its tamer advocates, as the more outspoken women were viewed as radicals who did not maintain their “proper” place in society. For this reason, it could be argued that the American West was not as open to women in the political arena as some may argue. For further discussion of this topic, see Victoria Lamont’s “‘More Than She Deserves’: Woman Suffrage Memorials in the ‘Equality State’”, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1: (2006), 17-43.
Bibliography


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