The Pioneer Women

Women pioneers shared in the danger and the work of settling the West. Most of these women were wives and mothers, but some were single women with motives of seeking homesteads, husbands, or other new opportunities. Pioneer women not only helped to shape the future of the West, but also earned new status for themselves and for women throughout the United States.

On the Trail

Between 1840 and 1869, about 350,000 people traveled west in covered wagons. Most westward-bound pioneers gathered each spring near Independence, Missouri. There they formed columns of wagons called wagon trains.

The journey west lasted four to six months and covered about 2,000 miles. Wagon space was so limited that pioneers were forced to leave most of the comforts of home behind. When the way became steep, they often had to toss out the few treasures they managed to bring. The Oregon Trail was littered with furniture, china, books, and other cherished objects.

Women were expected to do the work they had done back home, but while traveling 15 to 20 miles a day. They cooked, washed clothes, and took care of the children. Meals on wheels were simple. “About the only change we have from bread and bacon,” wrote Helen Carpenter, “is to bacon and bread.”

The daily drudgery wore many women down. Lavinia Porter recalled, “I would make a brave effort to be cheerful and patient until the camp work was done. Then starting out ahead of the team and my men folks, when I thought I had gone beyond hearing distance, I would throw myself down on the unfriendly desert and give way like a child to sobs and tears.”

Trail Hazards

The death toll on the trail was high. Disease was the worst killer. Accidents were also common. People drowned crossing rivers. Indian attacks were rare, but the prospect of them added to the sense of danger.

By the end of the journey, each woman had a story to tell. Some had seen buffalo stampedes and prairie fires on the Great Plains. Some had almost frozen to death in the
mountains or died of thirst in the deserts. But most survived to build new lives in the West.

One group of pioneer women—African Americans who had escaped from slave states or who were brought west by their owners—faced a unique danger. Even though slavery was outlawed in most of the West, bounty hunters were often able to track down fugitive slaves. But for some African American women, the move west brought freedom. For example, when Biddy Mason’s owner tried to take her from California (a free state) to Texas, Mason sued for her freedom and won. She moved to Los Angeles, where she became a well-known pioneer and community leader.

**The Pioneer Women’s Legacy**

The journey west changed pioneer women. The hardships of the trail brought out strengths and abilities they did not know they possessed. “I felt a secret joy,” declared one Oregon pioneer, “in being able to have the power that sets things going.”

Women did set things going. Wherever they settled, schools, churches, libraries, literary societies, and charitable groups soon blossomed. Annie Bidwell, for example, left behind a remarkable legacy. When Annie married John Bidwell, she moved to his ranch in what is now the town of Chico, California. There she taught sewing to local Indian women and helped their children learn to read and write English. Annie convinced John to give up drinking—he closed the tavern that had been part of his home—and encouraged the building of Chico’s first church.

Annie was active in other causes as well, including the movement to give women a right that had long been denied them in the East: the right to vote. Wyoming Territory led the way by granting women the right to vote in 1869. By 1900, a full 20 years before women across the nation would win the right to vote, women were voting in four western states. The freedom and sense of equality enjoyed by women in the West helped pave the way for more equal treatment of women throughout the United States. This was perhaps the greatest legacy of the women pioneers.