
Colorado Pioneer Women along Unmarked Borders: Crossings in the Stories They Told

Lee Schweninger*¹

¹University of North Carolina, Wilmington – United States

Abstract

This paper argues that the diaries, journals, local newspaper and women's clubs publications, as well as as-told-to accounts recounted by pioneer women, constitute an important component of women's literary narratives of crossing literal and figurative borders in the nineteenth-century settling of the American West. Narratives garnered from these sources (collected by Civil Works Administration field workers in Colorado in the 1930s) provide unique glimpses into how these early settlers (both European-American and Native American) dealt with the unfamiliar and sometimes very harsh landscapes, extreme weather, and others already occupying the land (including long-established American Indians, land-holding Mexicans, and recently arrived European-American cattlemen and outlaws). We see what their cross-cultural interactions were like and how circumstances forced crossing not only of literal borders but also the necessary defying of gender-role expectations. The narratives under investigation in this paper demonstrate that many pioneer women forced themselves to alter their own self-expectations as they balanced between the West's attractions and its detractions (and distractions). They embraced the opportunity to actually possess and farm their own land, make at least a comfortable living, and provide a healthful climate and atmosphere for raising their families; at the same time they accepted the reality of the hardships presented by the natural environment, personal and interpersonal conflicts, and various political struggles. Notwithstanding the accounts of such challenges, these women narrators did indeed survive and often did remain on the land they claimed and settled. The narratives provide the records of those who were successful and who became permanent residents. The investigation of these narratives suggests new understandings of the roles of women in the settlement of and even exploitation of the West. The investigation provides us with a fuller understanding of the cast of characters who had a part in settling the West in very specific contexts.

*Speaker