A woman's life is transhistorical. It is cyclical and repetitive: the similarities between a peasant woman's life in the twentieth century and her sister three hundred years before are great. The life of an urban woman also shares many characteristics with the life of a rural woman; the generations of women's lives, crossing the time and space barrier, are more alike than different. This viewpoint may startle you since it is being spoken by a historian (or herstorian as is the case here). The study of the past is generally viewed as the study of change over time while I am arguing that the study of women's lives over time show more similarities than differences between generations, cultures, and times.

The natural rhythm of a woman's life has not changed essentially throughout recorded time; most cultures, Western and Eastern alike, emphasize the biological role of woman as her primary social role as well: woman as mother. The functions of that role may vary, expand and contract, in different cultures and at different times, but the essential definitions of woman has not. After motherhood, helpmate to man is woman's second essential role. In both primary roles, as mother and helpmate, woman is seen as secondary to her children and her husband; surely, she is essential to the survival of the species and to the well-being of the home and hearth, but she is not the prime mover in her life. She does not determine her own individual
destiny. All of the culture’s representatives do that for her. Most importantly, in most cultures she is not an authority figure; neither is she allowed autonomy and choice in her adult life.

An Ohio tombstone of the early nineteenth century poignantly illustrates the life of many women in many countries across time:

Thirteen years I was a virgin,
Two years I was a wife,
One year I was a mother,
the next year took my life . . .

Women have generally accepted their role definition. Like men, they have played their expected roles and defined their worth and happiness by the culture’s standards. However, in each and every generation of recorded time, there have been members of both sexes who have questioned and sometimes rebelled against society’s strictures. Overt women rebels have been fewer since their acculturation has emphasized the absolute opposite human qualities: women should be passive, obedient to their fathers and husbands, and deferential to others. As the popular folk song “The Wagoner’s Lad” sings:

The heart is the fortune of all womankind,
They’re always controlled, they’re always confined,
Controlled by their family until they are wives,
Then slaves to their husbands the rest of their lives.

Women are expected to be the compromisers and the self-sacrificers; they mediate family quarrels and they make peace between brothers and sisters. Thus, it is exceedingly difficult for women to break out of accepted and respected patterns; individual inquiry, self-determination, and independence are not female traits in Western culture; they are male characteristics only.

Within this quickly drawn framework, frontier American women appear as important and revelatory examples of the endurance of cultural attitudes about women as well as interesting examples of how women have resisted those very norms. Frontier women offer us diverse examples of women as adapters and women as resisters to the dominant cultural patterns for women. Throughout history and herstory, when
women have adapted themselves to the "proper" behavioral patterns, they have often done so in unique and novel ways. For example, in a story by Mary Wilkins Freeman called "The Revolt of Mother," written in the late nineteenth century, (and fiction, by the way, is often an important source of social and women's history) a New England farm wife moved her family into her husband's new barn while he was away, in protest to his insistence that new barns were more important than a new home for the family. Historian Everett Dick noted the same phenomenon when he wrote:

"There was a tendency for the homesteader to buy new machinery to till broad acres and build new barns to house more stock and grain, while his wife went about the drudgery of household life in the old way in a little drab dwelling over-shadowed by the splendor of machine farming.

While the homesteader's wife did not rebel in the historian's account, she did so when treated by a woman writer. Perhaps many real life women rebelled as well; or perhaps they fantasized rebelling though never acting out their fantasy. Or still more likely, they acted out their unhappiness in covert ways; they manipulated their children or denied their husbands conjugal privileges. One of the difficult aspects of recreating the woman's story in frontier and rural America is the paucity of sources describing the feelings and authentic wishes of wives and mothers. When you live in a culture that depreciates the value of woman's thoughts and hopes, you do not preserve her diary or letters.

The farmer's wife who moved her family into the barn rebelled, yet remained within the basic structures of American values. She asserted her rights, but her rights were socially approved ones; she wished a nicer home for her family. Most women, in all environments, have lived within the family unit and have not abandoned their families in favor of their own autonomy. There are few if any women who could imitate Huck Finn and light out for the territory; there are few literary or real life models for women to begin a solitary odyssey of searching and exploring. The dreams of both sexes, after all, are largely cultural dreams, dreams learned from parents, teachers, books, friends, and in the twentieth century, movies, radio, and television.
All human beings either learn to adapt to their life circumstances or they die; the adaptation may be painful, pathological, and unpleasant, but it is made. Some reconciliation with the environment is required in order to exist. So young brides left their families in Massachusetts and began an arduous trek to the Dakotas with their new husbands because they accepted the Biblical Ruth's view: "Whither thou goest, I will go." Their parents had raised them to marry and raise their own families, thereby perpetuating the seemingly natural and proper life rhythm they had experienced. The young brides were probably apprehensive, frightened by the unknown, as were their equally frightened grooms, but they dutifully went. One commentator on the westward movement of the pioneers noted that "plains travel and frontier life are peculiarly severe upon women and oxen."

The hard seats of the covered wagons, the makeshift eating and sleeping arrangements, the constant fear of Indians, windstorms, heavy rains, and childbirths in the middle of nowhere all make the woman's adaptation to the new environments difficult and arduous. But most of them made it uncomplainingly; they are the true heroines of the westward trek. Occasionally a dubious woman would share her qualms, and thereby exercise mild resistance to cultural expectations, by writing of the dangers and utter hardships of frontier life. Infrequently, *Godey's Lady's Book*, the popular mid-nineteenth-century woman's magazine, published a piece that
challenged the accepted view that women should follow the men westward dutifully:

"To the prairie I'll fly not, young rover with thee," wrote W.D. Brinckle in the September 1840 edition of *Godey's*.

> Its wideness and wildness have no charms for me,
> O'er its silken bosom though summer winds glide,
> To the prairie I'll fly not a wild hunter's bride.
> Though fawns in the meadow fields fearlessly play
> And the landscape's enchanting and nature so gay,
> To the prairie I'll fly not! then linger not here,
> So far from the home of your light footed deer.

And in the next verse,

> To the prairie I'll fly not, at least not with thee,
> So away to your wild sports, and think not of me,
> What, fly to the prairie? I could not live there,
> With the Indian and panther, and bison, and bear;
> Then cease to torment me, I'll give not my hand,
> to one, whose abode's in so savage a land.

Since the ratio of women to men on the frontier was one to three, perhaps many women agreed that "I could not live there." But most communities became communities precisely because some women came, established families and homes, churches and schools; indeed, the assumption that women were needed to create a stable culture is true in this sense. A mining town that was inhabited by solitary men and prostitutes did not become a thriving town; surely the end of the gold or whatever other mineral was being mined played a key role in the demise of the town, but the absence of families, of stable communities, was also an interlocking factor.

Women came and found themselves living in windowless homes, dirt floor shacks, and dugouts. They responded to their new, difficult circumstances uncomplainingly; they planted pumpkins, raised chickens, learned to shoot a rifle, and put up forty-gallon barrels of cucumber pickles. They defied the newly emerging city image of women as delicate, frail, and pale. They behaved, like good pragmatic Americans, and adapted to their new surroundings with gusto, energy, and determination. Indeed, the female version of the hardy pioneer needs more attention in our records of frontier life in America.

Women wrote their friends back home what the new
frontier was like. One said, "When we got to the new purchase, the land of milk and honey, we were disappointed and homesick, but we were there and had to make the best of it." And another woman wrote, "Can it be that I have left my quiet little home and taken this dreary land of a solitude in exchange? It is truly so, but I must not let my mind run in this channel long or my happiness is gone."

Travelers to frontier America often noted the spunky quality of the women. In sharp contrast to the citified women with their multiple layers of petticoats, their delicate natures, and their tendency to faint, frontier and rural women lacked pretension, bustled around, cooked, canned, and generally kept the home fires burning with good cheer and good will. Before schools were established, they read the Bible to their children, taught the young ones basic skills, and established rituals of concern for religion, government, and social morality that otherwise would have remained untaught and unknown. Frontier women remained optimistic despite evidence to the contrary. They cleaned the dust out of their houses knowing that the same task would be required the next day. They endured the wrinkled skin, the chapped hands, and the rough clothing, hoping against hope, that things would get better, the crops would improve, the fur skins yield more money, and the winter remain mild.

Surely the hostility of the natural environment was a major problem that both sexes shared; the wind and the rain, the poor price for wheat, the exploitative railroad, and the isolation of a farm were not uniquely woman's problems. However, the
domestic sphere of the woman kept her more closely tied to the rhythms of the daily routine at home than the man. While women churned butter, weaved clothes, raised chickens, and planted vegetable gardens, all arduous tasks defined as part of the wifely and motherly role, the men went hunting, bartering, negotiating, and carousing with their male friends. The world beyond the farm belonged to the man far more than to the woman. Her physical landscape was restricted.

Eliza Farnham described the male population of Illinois that lived on the prairie lands as "unequivocally indolent. On a bright day they mount their horses and throng the little towns in the vicinity of their homes, drinking and trading horses till late in the evening." Another commentator noted that many men farmers, rather than "resting on one day in seven, work only one day in six; and therefore ever remain poor." Anna Howard Shaw, who grew up to be a minister and leading suffragist, remembered her early life in northern Michigan this way:

Like most men, my dear father should never have married . . . . Thus, when he took up his claim of three hundred and sixty acres of land in the wilderness of northern Michigan, and sent my mother and five young children to live there alone until he could join us eighteen months later, he gave no thought to the manner in which we were to make the struggle and survive the hardships before us. He had furnished us the land and the four walls of a log cabin.

The man on horseback, moving across the prairie and plains, is a common image; the woman bending over the open fire, sewing, reading, nursing the baby, or tending to the sick is the usual female portrait of frontier women. The striking difference is critical and surely based on reality. The men moved around, ever searching and socializing, while the women remained close to home, hearth, and family. Her landscape was narrow and well defined; his was open, changing, and unpredictable.

Each woman within her own family preserved the separation of women from other women as well as from other male society. The quilting bees, houseraising parties, church bazaars, square dances, fourth of July parties, and various women's clubs provided the only sociability in an otherwise lonely and isolated life. Though all wives of frontiersmen shared most of the same
experiences, they saw their primary allegiances to their husbands and children; though they may have complained about their husband’s drinking or bad temper, they usually accepted their fates as inevitable. They never questioned the family unit as the only way to raise children; they rarely challenged their husbands’ authority. Most women remained accepters, adaptors to the harsh environment they lived in; only few ever openly challenged the social roles or arrangements.

All of woman’s work in frontier and rural America centered around the home. The chores could be unending, difficult, and challenging, but they did not remove her from her home. They could be physically and emotionally trying, but they remained womanly because they focused upon the wife-mother role of woman. The new inventions of the 1880s lightened the physical load of women but did not change the task; a crude washing machine was used by the woman, not the husband; the new water pump eased the physical labor of drawing water but the chore was still performed by women. The new sewing machine still kept the job of sewing in women’s hands. Technology is not an independent variable; it serves cultures and cultural values. As long as American values define women as homemakers, the so-called labor saving devices still keep the woman in her place.

If the domestic sphere was highly valued and if the official authorities of the culture demonstrated their belief in the equal importance of domestic tasks with tasks performed outside of the home, then the woman, living on the frontier or in a small town or in a large city, would have no qualms or complaints. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. While ministers and politicians will occasionally pay lip service to the sacredness of the wifely and motherly function, they will not display their respect in concrete ways; politicians resisted granting women political rights, and ministers, though appreciating the fact that the majority of their audience on any Sunday consisted of women, did not encourage women to become ministers or to participate in policy decisions affecting the church. The woman’s auxiliary raised money for the orphans and the poor but the church board members, all men, decided whether to build an addition to the church next year.

Whose opinion is regarded? is a significant testing question. Does the farmer listen to his wife over his male neighbors? Does
Grace W. Fairchild amassed 1,440 acres of South Dakota land.

he build the new house or the new barn? Does he display concern for the physically and psychically demanding tasks his wife performs? Imagine the scene described by an English traveler to a Kentucky frontier home in the 1840s; the husband had just returned from a three-day hunting trip. His wife prepared dinner for all. The husband never spoke to his wife or children, never asked them about their activities while he was gone, never showed any human warmth or concern. The traveler went away shaking his head in wonderment. The stoicism of the wife impressed him mightily.

Most women endured because they had few choices. Some few, and it is those whom we know about, openly defied their husbands, took their children and ran. But where could they go? In an age when divorce favored men and in which married women had no legal rights or job training, what could they do except become prostitutes, cooks, or domestics in someone else’s home? Some women achieved a measure of financial independence, thereby giving them respect in the eyes of the community; in American culture, a profit-making person, even if it is female, is awesome and deserving of respect. A California woman in 1852, for example, sold $18,000 worth of pies in less than a year for a profit of $6,000. Widows became ranchers and
probably surprised everyone, including themselves, at their ability to manage a large enterprise. Most of the fortunes made by women, though, remained within socially approved occupations; they managed successful taverns, administered their late husband's estate, sold raisins and grapes commercially, or became entertainers.

Frontier women generally reproduced, in their newly forming communities, the same social patterns they had learned back home. They subscribed to eastern magazines as their claim to gentility; they joined the church and performed good works; they created schools for their children, and they tried to imitate the latest fashions of the East. One Wyoming woman recalled her youth in the 1870s and remembered "turning the pages of Godey's Lady's Book and gazing enraptured at the picture of a tall, stately lady in a gorgeous blue silk dress and tight-fitting basque buttoned from neck to hem, flowing sleeves and frilled lace undersleeves, long, full, flounced skirt which swept the floor."

But necessity sometimes interfered with their wish to imitate the more established culture of the East. Many frontier women, who worked in the fields, wore bloomers or some form of trousers before the feminists advocated it. They did it because it was more comfortable and manageable. One man observed a creature wearing an unusual outfit in Indiana in the 1820s in the following way:

A strange figure emerged from the tall rank weeds into the road before us, and continued to move in front, apparently never having noticed our approach. The figure was undeniably human; and yet at bottom it seemed to be a man, for there were a man's tow-linen breeches; at top, a woman; for there was the semblance of a short gown, and indeed a female kerchief on the neck and a sun-bonnet on the head.

...It originated in the necessities of a new country, where women must hunt cows hid in tall weeds and coarse grass on dewy or frosty mornings.

A sign of gentility, of middle class status in small town America, was the ability to wear three yards of petticoats, a whalebone corset, and a flowered bonnet. Progress indeed.

The respectable women's organizations that emerged in all communities provided women with companionship and experience in organization, in public speaking, and in politicking.
Most of the organization women did not transfer these newly found skills to the polling place or the business world, but they did gain immeasurably as human beings. Their self-image was raised, their sense of isolation broken down, and their social needs satisfied. They shared happiness and sorrow with other women; they formed precious friendships. One farmer’s wife walked two and a half miles, with one child on her back and another one holding her hand, in order to visit a new woman neighbor. Women baked pies together, sewed clothing together, and gossiped together. The very act of being together gave them comfort and courage.

Frontier women relied on their women neighbors to assist them in childbirth, to suggest medicines for their sick children, and to attend the disabled. They shared knowledge and expertise gained from practical experience. Midwives were the doctors of other women on the frontier and in rural areas. But, like city women, frontier women willingly replaced their midwives for male doctors when they became available. They implicitly shared the view that male doctors are better trained, more competent, and more authoritative than female practitioners of the healing arts. In this example, as in many others, they behaved like most women in most environments have behaved: they relinquished female wisdom for male wisdom and assumed that the latter was more valuable than the former.

Though feminine modesty prevented many women from consulting male doctors in the nineteenth century, it was generally assumed that a book-trained doctor knew more about illness than a practically trained midwife. At least two outspoken assumptions of American culture were operative here: first, the belief in male authority over female authority as a given; and second, the belief that book learning is ipso facto superior to on-the-job training. Both assumptions, I would submit, are suspect. A newly arrived male doctor knew little of complications in childbirth; he knew less about the available herbs and medicines that would combat fevers. Given the low quality of medical training in the nineteenth century and the fact that many barbers claimed to be doctors, the women traded in long years of experience for the status symbol of visiting a doctor.

Another important dimension arising from this example is
worth noting: in an environment where available knowledge and skill is scarce, people are required to use their ingenuity and acquire knowledge on their own; they cannot afford to wait for the expert who will never come. In this context, women are often enlisted to be the doctors, the lawyers, the merchandisers, and the manufacturers of the culture. In an isolated farming community in the Dakotas, for example, in the 1870s and 1880s, midwives delivered the babies and prescribed the medicines; women pleaded their own cases in the circuit courts; women ran taverns, boarding houses, and general stores; and women produced the clothing for all family members, the butter and cheese, the vegetables, and the candles. All human resources were at a premium and the female of the species became a valuable asset.

The growth of communities and the attendant development of professions have worked against the woman’s continued growth into a variety of human roles. With the diminishing of the frontier, the woman’s role has been restricted; her functions have been removed from the household, her primary territory, and given over to the newly created social institutions designed to do the doctoring, lawyering, merchandising, and manufacturing formerly accomplished in the woman’s home. Medicine was originally defined as a profession peculiarly fit to the woman’s role. After all, wasn’t nursing akin to nurturing? Healing was part of the natural womanly role. It was not unwomanly to doctor. The American Medical Association did not share this view, however, and the growth of professionalism in medicine has militated against woman’s participation.

Indeed, the growing specialization of tasks in a community has worked against women. It was not inherent that it should be so. The growth of a community, increasing industrialization, and specialization of tasks does not require, in and of itself, that women will be discriminated against. Rather, it is the perpetuation of the woman as mother and helpmate role that militates against woman’s active participation in the new challenges and opportunities of a culture. Because woman as homebody has remained the enduring image and goal, she cannot spend time away from family to attend medical school; she cannot enter a job training program at seventeen that would require long hours and a life-time commitment to work. Though women have
always worked in the factories and offices of America, no one has ever defined their work as primary to their life purpose, as intellectually satisfying, as critical to the society. Unmarried women work outside of the home prior to marriage and possibly after middle age; widows work and spinsters work. But not until very recently have young married women with young children entered the labor force.

Work outside the home has never been defined as essential to a woman’s identity. Her reason for being and her gratifications remain in the home. With this understanding, it is not difficult to see why work outside the home has never occupied stage center for most women. None of the culture’s representatives ever valued such activity for women. Further, social institutions reflect this point of view. No professional school accommodates married women with young children. No cultural representative advocates women remaining unmarried, or if married, delaying motherhood. All of the cultural forces point to wifehood and motherhood as being the adult woman’s primary essence. Neither the frontier nor the city modified this value.

As western communities developed, women organized a variety of groups to serve the social needs of their community. They became the humanizers of the culture, aiding the orphaned and the poor, creating benevolent societies, and planning church bazaars. Some women became zealous temperance workers and the boldest joined suffrage organizations.
The spectrum of women's organizations, begun in the nineteenth century, is rich and diverse. Western women, like their counterparts in the East, sometimes became involved in state-wide or national organizations, while most organization women throughout the country worked solely in their own local community.

The strength and turbulence of the western temperance movement, with the active and sometimes dramatic participation of women, also demonstrated the close ties between the old values and the new environment. Evil rum ruined families; drunken men beat their wives and children and profaned the Lord. The same impulses that drove eastern women to organize temperance societies motivated their western sisters. However, in the West temperance and suffrage often intermingled and grape growers and bourbon producers became active resisters to women's suffrage. Though the suffragists and the temperance advocates were not mutually inclusive groups, the liquor interests saw them as identical and worked consistently to defeat woman's suffrage in California and elsewhere.

Abigail Scott Duniway, a long-time suffrage leader in the Pacific Northwest, continually argued that the two causes must remain separate; she became very dismayed when the national suffrage leader, Anna Howard Shaw, who also held office in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, came to Washington Territory to speak; Duniway wished she would disappear. She often reminded her audiences:

Every woman who stands behind the prison bars of her present political environment, reaching her manacled hands to men, who hold the key to the locked gates of constitutional law, through which she alone can gain her liberty, and says to them, "Give us the ballot, and we'll put down your whiskey!" only arouses a thousand men to say by their votes, "Very well, we won't give you the ballot and that will settle it. You shan't have it at all if you are going to use it as a whip over us."

Despite the undesirable link between temperance and suffrage, woman's suffrage had its earliest successes in the West. Indeed, the first dozen states to pass women's suffrage were west of the Mississippi. Though each territory fought its own unique battle for statehood, many women became voters in order to provide the necessary number of adult voters to qualify the territory for statehood. Such was the case in Colorado and Wyoming; in
Utah, the Mormon men needed their wives’ votes in order to preserve power and prevent the Gentiles from gaining political control.

The women’s suffrage campaigns, though, were difficult. Eastern suffrage leaders began traveling west in the late 1860s and often found the reception less than friendly. On one trip taken by Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw to a small Dakota town, the minister convinced all of the townswomen to stay home as the lecture was scheduled for the Sabbath. Undaunted, Anthony rented the local theater, roused a printer out of bed, printed handbills announcing the time and place of the suffrage lecture, and distributed them to all the homes in the town. “We had a glorious meeting,” said the Reverend Shaw. “Both Miss Anthony and I were in excellent fighting trim.” Wyoming Territory granted women the right to vote in 1869 and Colorado, Idaho, and Utah followed. The western states established a number of firsts for women’s political participation: the first woman justice of the peace was Esther Morris of Wyoming in 1869; in 1910 Mary G. Bellamy of Wyoming became the first woman elected to a state legislature; in 1917 Jeanette Rankin of Montana became the first woman in the United States House of Representatives; and in 1925 Nellie Tayloe Ross of Cheyenne became the first woman governor in the United States.

Despite these political firsts, the pattern for women’s participation in politics in the West did not vary from that in the East. Once again, cultural imperatives prevailed. Western women voted the way their husbands and fathers voted and/or they did not vote at all. Frontier and rural women of the West did not see themselves as active participators in governmental affairs; neither did their husbands, fathers, or brothers. They may have had the vote but it was not expected that they would form independent views, advocate specific issues, and actually run for elective office. Women’s political involvement was to be in the background as the party fund raisers, the party givers, and the doorbell ringers.

Whether the woman lived on a lonely, remote 160-acre farm or in a small town, she defined herself in terms of her family, not in terms of her sex. She did not perceive of political issues
as relating to all women; neither men nor women believed, in rugged, individualistic America of the nineteenth century, that government could serve people, identifiable groups of people who shared needs and problems. The less government the better was the prevailing philosophy; however, when men desired the legislature to act in their behalf, they abandoned their laissez faire philosophy. Surely railroad men, ranchers, big wheat farmers, grape growers, and large retailers used government for their own material benefit. But few women ever appreciated the fact that government could serve them as well. If government set aside land for agricultural schools, could not it establish programs for women? If government encouraged industry with preferential treatment, could not government improve the farmer’s lot?

These questions reflect a twentieth-century perspective. American society was not, and still is not, organized to serve individual needs; though the rhetoric of America emphasizes individual differences and individual rights, the words have rarely been translated into reality, especially for women. Nineteenth-century America reflects the dominant cultural attitudes perfectly. The crude efforts at medical research did not include investigation into effective birth control methods because the culture was committed to an ever growing population. Private colleges and professional schools often did not admit women because women did not need much education. The law only gradually came to recognize the rights of married women in some states at mid-century. At the opening of the twentieth century, women in most states could not sit on juries, vote, or initiate divorce proceedings.

Though western states, as already noted, granted women the right to vote and in some states to sit on juries, the reform did not alter basic attitudes or practices. In fact, the western example is a very good instance in which “good” laws, though enforced, did not change social behavior. Women voted but they did not vote in a bloc; they did not identify themselves according to their sex; they did not work for women’s rights, a concept that was already well known and publicized by the middle of the last century. Though a few feminists defined women’s rights broadly, most women who dared to consider the
subject confined their hopes to suffrage. All American women shared the general view that women were well treated and with the acquisition of voting rights would be fully equal.

Surely farming women, factory women workers, women ranchers, and widows with small children to support knew that life was hard, each day a struggle to get through, but they still shared the male belief in the inevitable progress of America and the view that this is the best of all possible countries. Men and women shared the American ideology; they worked together to improve the land, expand their holdings, endure another winter, and see their children live a better life than they had. Since most women married, they followed the male direction for their lives; they literally gave up their identity, fate, and future to the man who became their husband.

Abigail Scott became a school teacher in Oregon Territory in the 1850s; her career as a school teacher did not last long. She met a rancher named Ben Duniway, married him, and within the first two and a half years of married life, bore him two children. She later noted that the early years of her marriage were not what she had expected or hoped for:

...to make thousands of pounds of butter every year for market, not including what was used in our free hotel at home; to sew and cook, and wash and iron; to bake and clean and stew and fry; to be, in short, a general pioneer drudge, with never a penny of my own, was not pleasant business for an erstwhile school teacher, who had earned a salary that had not gone before marriage, as did her butter and eggs and chickens afterwards, for groceries, and to pay taxes or keep up the wear and tear of horseshoeing, plow-sharpening and harness-mending.

Farming women and rural women remained hardy and enduring in the twentieth century. In a series of informative and heroic letters written during the height of the Oklahoma dust storms in 1935, Caroline Henderson, who with her husband, Will, had been farming for twenty-eight years, wrote to her girl friend in Maryland about her situation:

Eleanor (her daughter) has laid aside the medical books for a time. Wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the accumulations of wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go.

Once when her husband and daughter went visiting, Caroline
Henderson stayed home and her account of her chores was
terministic of an earlier age:

... I stayed here to care for a new Shorthorn brother, to keep the
chickens' pail filled with fresh water, to turn the cattle and horses
in to water at noon, and to keep them from straying to the
extremely poisonous drought-stricken cane.

The new tractors of the twentieth century enabled her daughter
Eleanor to drive the tractor and to be an enormous aid to her
father. Mrs. Henderson concludes one letter by saying:

On days like this, when William Vaughn Moody's expression 'dust
to eat' suggests a literal danger, we can't help questioning whether
the traits we would rather think of as courage and perseverance
are not actually recklessness and inertia. Who shall say?

Though written with greater literary style, Mrs. Henderson's
words, thoughts, and concerns were shared by thousands of
women who endured the trials of farming and frontier life in
every century.

It is no accident that the women who emerged as leaders in
reform movements, be it suffrage, temperance, philanthropy, or
educational reform, were often middle-aged women. It was only
after they had dutifully raised their families that they could
turn their attention to the larger society. Elizabeth Cady
Stanton, the monumental leader of the women's rights move-
ment for most of the nineteenth century, wrote speeches during
her childbearing and rearing years, speeches that Susan B. Anthony delivered. It was only after her children were grown that she could join Anthony for the long treks to different states to wage the suffrage battle. The majority of women reformers, contrary to nasty myths, were married women, but they were women who had raised their children and gained the approval of their husbands to engage in social reform.

Sometimes the women reformers were widows or spinsters, but more often they were respectably married women who believed in acting for a cause that appealed to them. Sometimes they had to work because their husbands did not earn a sufficient living and in working, discovered how mistreated women were. Mary Elizabeth Lease, for example, had a husband who barely earned a living as a druggist in Wichita in the 1880s. Ambitious and intellectually curious, Mary decided to read law and, much to everyone’s amazement, was admitted to the bar in 1885. She soon learned another important fact: that the law discriminated against women as well. For women to be free, she reasoned, they had to be politically and economically independent. She resolved to enter politics and soon became a fiery spokeswoman for the newly forming People’s party, the Populist party. During the 1890 campaign, she made 161 speeches and told farmers in her famous words, “What you farmers need is to raise less corn and more hell.”

While few women became like Mary Lease, an overt challenger to the culture’s standards for women, many used covert means to resist male authority. Many women became wily, manipulative, and sometimes deceitful in order to obtain the power that they could not have openly. While in the East the growing middle class of urban ladies took to their beds, fainted frequently, and sometimes became hysterical, a frontier or rural woman could not afford that luxury. There was simply too much work to be done and too few hands to do it. So western women had to devise other covert means to obtain their ends. They learned to cajole their sons and flatter their husbands; they learned to give and withhold sexual favors. They also learned, along with their eastern sisters, that socially approved good works served their needs for sociability as well. While attending a church bazaar, they helped their neighbors while gossiping with them.
In a culture where crying is womanly and emotions are a female domain, women become the hearts of a community. In a culture where interpersonal relationships are the very essence of a woman’s life, women become the volunteer organizers of hospitals, orphanages, socials, and marriages. Women accept, as their social role, and in keeping with their primary role as homemakers, the responsibility to humanize the community. They kiss the hurt child; they show concern for the new widow; they bring reading material to the sick. Both men and women in America assumed that women were naturally more moral, more humane, and more considerate than men. Both sexes acted on that belief, when in reality, women were behaving according to cultural norms, not biological ones.

For truth to tell, women can be aggressive, hurtful, inconsiderate, and immoral as well as men can be. Women protecting their homes and families against Indians wielded a rifle as well as any man. Greedy women, willing to flaunt society’s morals, established brothels in every new frontier community. Most women, however, like most men, behave according to socially prescribed patterns. It is easier to adapt than to resist; or if resistance is essential to preserve your integrity and well being, it can often be done more effectively in a covert manner. Women, like men, learned this lesson on the frontier as well as in the city.

Frontier women, then, represent an important model of adaptive and resistant women. They illustrate the immense energy, endurance, ability, and ingenuity of American women. They could be frank and forthright reformers like Mary Elizabeth Lease and Abigail Scott Duniway; they could be long suffering and tough like Caroline Henderson who stood by her husband through thick and thin. They could be Calamity Janes, actresses, or school mams. Together they brought eastern culture to western prairies and plains; they reminded men of the need for stability and order; and they preserved and enhanced the family as the fundamental social institution for all humans. They raised their sons and daughters to respect religion, government, and the American way. They hoped to live to see their grandchildren and the repetition of the life cycle. They were essential for the survival of the species, both biologically and culturally.
Surely, most frontier women died content in the knowledge that their labors bore fruit; the hard won land yielded its treasures, the vegetable garden produced its greenery, the children survived childhood, and the future always looked brighter. Surely, these women's lives deserve inclusion in the record books of the past. If endurance under strain, commitment to values, and heroic determination to succeed are American virtues, frontier women possessed these qualities in abundance. It is the builders, adapters, and constructive resisters that are the past and the future of America and women have always been included in those numbers.¹
