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Although the term “pioneer” in the book title recalls Turner’s West where white emigrants were the vanguard of civilization, Lee Schweninger places these narratives within the contexts of gendered and postcolonial scholarship. In a thoughtful introduction, Schweninger emphasizes the value of firsthand testimony from ordinary people, especially women, who lived outside circles of public leadership and power. Women’s narratives provide insight into changing family and community relations; links between local, regional, and national economies; contests over land and resources; racial-ethnic identities and tensions; and how women made meaning out of their western experience.

In the winter of 1933–34, the Civil Works Administration launched an oral history project on Colorado settlement from the 1870s through the early 1900s. Thirty field workers supervised by LeRoy Hafen were hired on. In response to fieldworker Laura White’s initiative, the project continued with funding from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. For this collection, Schweninger selected sixty-nine narratives told by women and recorded in the first person. Most are Euro-American, some native born, others first-generation immigrants. A handful of Native American women tell their stories as well, offering glimpses of Navajo, Ute, and Goshute experiences in the region.

The narratives, rich with observation, can be mined for new insights into environmental, Native American, Great Plains, and gender history. Colorado encompasses diverse ecozones, from shortgrass prairie on the eastern slope to mountains reaching 14,000 feet, to desert plateau country on the western slope. Narrators’ descriptions of where they lived, did business, and socialized reveal geographic units not contained by county lines. Settlers in Routt County, for example, settled, traded, traveled, and resettled in an orbit that included not only northwestern Colorado but also parts of eastern Utah and southern Wyoming because the topography, livestock range, river basins, and Plains formed a coherent region.

Schweninger highlights Peter Iverson’s call for histories of the American West to consider “forms of resistance by indigenous peoples that took place away from the battlefield.” In one of the most intriguing narratives, Mrs. Dan’els, a Navajo who married a white Mormon, reflects on ranching and mining coal in Moffat County. When Church leaders pressured her husband to relinquish his mine to Mormon coffers, and later pressured him to take plural wives, she opposed it. (Her husband refused the Church on both counts.) Her cultural and political attitudes defy facile generalization; she embraced ranching and mining, moved comfortably in Anglo culture, and maintained a strong tribal identity: “I am not an Indian. I am a Navajo,” she said.
Schweninger cautions readers that these narrators represent the successful and the survivors, Indian and white alike. Lizzie Gordon Buchanan remarked, “In 1885, I had the western fever . . . to get some land in Colorado and start a fortune for myself.” On the High Plains of Logan County, she filed one claim under the Timber Culture Act, and preempted another under Homestead law. She proved up on both, then sold them to the Burlington & Missouri Railroad for $6,000, a profit by any standard. But as Schweninger reminds us, we do not know why the homesteader she preempted had abandoned the claim.

In sum, this collection makes a valuable addition to the published narratives of western women. Scholars and lay readers will find much to deepen our understanding of women’s cultural diversity and relation to the land, as well as testimony that complicates our perception of conflicts between Utes and Euro-Americans in Colorado.

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