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Review of *Frontierswomen: The. Iowa Experience* By Glenda Riley

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Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience. By Glenda Riley. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliographic essay, index. ix + 211 pp. \$18.95.

Glenda Riley's book offers the reader an absorbing account of the life-styles of Iowa frontierswomen (1830-70). Drawing upon whatever sources are available (personal papers, official records, the work of other scholars), Riley begins with the assumption that the history of women's experience is important and worth the trouble to search out, although earlier neglect has made the job difficult and in some instances impossible. Beyond this assumption, her account is as nearly non-sexist, nonjudgmental, and nonsentimental as one could ask for. She describes the women in the public eye: those few professional women and suffragists who were branded "strong-minded." But her focus is on the farm women, the seemingly anonymous wives and mothers who contributed economically and emotionally to the emerging culture of Iowa. In their own ways, she says, these women who achieved much were also strong-minded women.

Her findings consistently puncture one-dimensional stereotypes about life on the frontier. Just as there were many frontiers, so too there were many frontierswomen, each responding differently to the western environment. If some were lonely or afraid of Indians, many others were not so. Riley asks the hard questions and avoids the temptation to draw more from her sources than the historian should. One example of questions raised, then wisely left unanswered: "Did women's running commentaries on the difficulty of men's tasks indicate that women had been socialized to

think of their own labor as only supplementary? Or did women genuinely feel sympathetic with the demanding lot of their men?" Only the novelist should dare to answer such questions, and only after studying such a book as Riley's.

Separate chapters focus on the overland pioneering journey to Iowa, the settlement and early years on the frontier, the economic role of women, the experience of ethnic and black women, wartime and its consequences for frontierswomen, women's education and work outside the home, and the realities of women's experiences versus the myths perpetuated about them. Each chapter is carefully documented, and a well-organized bibliographic essay points the reader to additional material.

Riley interweaves her commentary on the frontierswomen with anecdotal examples from her sources. Also included are details that tell us, for instance, how a covered wagon was outfitted, what a sod house was like, and how clothing was made before cloth and sewing machines were available. Particularly interesting is her chapter "Not Gainfully Employed," which takes its title from a U.S. Census Bureau heading under which most Iowa pioneer women were grouped. She documents the economic contributions of women to their families, whom they served as manufacturers, producers, supervisors, and workers. The chapter on wartime and its impact reveals that women usually coped well, often doing "men's work" to hold together their families through stress of loneliness and financial problems. At the war's end many retreated to their earlier roles, but "armed with the knowledge" that they could do other things. The drive for woman suffrage soon gained momentum, until at one point it seemed that Iowa might well be the first state to approve universal adult suffrage; but internal conflicts within the movement as well as a general conservative reaction led to postponements and neglect. Woman suffrage came to Iowa only through the Nineteenth Amendment—fifty years after it had seemed within easy reach. Riley points no parallels to the aftermath of World War II and the flagging

Equal Rights Amendment, but the reader will likely recognize this mirror of history.

Frontierswomen follows a number of recent studies that help us to know better and understand the nature of women's experiences in the settling of the West. Other historians, such as Julie Roy Jeffrey (*Frontier Women*, 1979), have attempted to cover the West as a whole or as a specific but diversified region (as Christiane Fischer does in her collection of women's accounts in *Let Them Speak for Themselves*, 1977). Riley's book begins the now necessary task of taking a closer look at smaller segments of the West. The results are a significant contribution to our understanding of a very large subject. If there is one caution for the reader, it is one that Riley herself acknowledges: we cannot generalize from Iowa frontierswomen to all other frontierswomen. There were many different frontiers, many varieties of physical environment—and many individual people who involved themselves in frontier life. Riley's book is one more title in the fascinating historical mosaic.

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