

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 1981

**Review of *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* By Julie Roy Jeffrey**

Sandra L. Myres

*University of Texas at Arlington*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Myres, Sandra L., "Review of *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* By Julie Roy Jeffrey" (1981). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1880.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1880>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880.* By Julie Roy Jeffrey. New York: Hill and Wang, 1979. Bibliography, index. xvi + 240 pp. \$11.95.

The exploration and settlement of the American West have long been subjects of interest to American historians and their readers, but until recently the frontier was viewed as a predominantly male experience. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontiers were explored, conquered, and settled by men, and Turner's successors kept to the male theme. The few women who were mentioned in western history texts and general studies could be counted on the fingers of one hand—Sacajawea, Narcissa Whitman, and Calamity Jane—with an occasional sprinkling of brave pioneer mothers and mining camp prostitutes with hearts of gold.

In the wake of the feminist movement, an attempt was made to redress this imbalance, and during the 1970s articles began to appear dealing with various aspects of women's roles in the westering experience. Now Julie R.

Jeffrey has provided a book-length study of frontier women, and her contribution to both western and women's history is an important one. Working from letters, diaries, and reminiscences of frontier women, Jeffrey presents an interesting and straightforward account of what pioneering was really like for the women who participated in the westward movement. Her stage is the trans-Mississippi West, and her players are mostly white, middle-class women who recorded their experiences, and often their feelings, about the pleasures and problems of making a new home in the West.

Jeffrey focuses her study primarily on the agricultural frontier of the period 1840-1880, the overland trails to California and Oregon, and the mining frontier, although she also discusses the Mormon experience and some aspects of the urban frontier. Some geographic areas (notably the Southwest) are not covered, and she has wisely chosen not to include immigrant women whose backgrounds and value systems made their adjustment to frontier conditions different from those of women with predominantly rural or small-town Anglo backgrounds. She has also chosen to exclude minority women—blacks, Mexican-Americans, and Indians—and interracial and intercultural relations between them and WASP women. This is an area that needs further research, and I hope that Jeffrey will provide such studies in later monographs and articles.

Jeffrey has reached some interesting conclusions about westering women. They recalled the pioneer period with "distaste," she writes, but they were also proud of their courage in the face of adverse conditions and the active role that they had taken in the "civilizing" of the frontier. Nonetheless, Jeffrey believes, frontiering did not change women's views of themselves and their role in society, and they continued to be bound by "constricting and sexist" ideas of woman's "place." For women, the frontier was not a liberating influence.

Jeffrey's research is far ranging, and she has presented her material in a spritely and easily readable style. Unfortunately, the publisher chose not to include footnotes. There is a

bibliographic note for each chapter, but it is frustrating to be unable to locate a specific quotation or fact. Despite this shortcoming, Jeffrey's work is an important contribution to the history of the American West, and she has pointed the way for the type of research in this field which is long overdue.

SANDRA L. MYRES  
Department of History  
University of Texas at Arlington