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Review of *Pioneer Children on the Journey West* By Emmy E. Werner

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Pioneer Children on the Journey West. By Emmy E. Werner. Boulder: Westview Press, 1995. Introduction, illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. xii + 202 pp. \$21.95 cloth. \$16.00 paper.

Emmy E. Werner, a developmental psychologist specializing in high-risk children, traces stories of pioneer children on the long, arduous overland journey from the banks of the Mississippi to the Pacific shore. She quotes diaries, letters, and memoirs of children and adults who crossed grasslands, mountains, and deserts on the various trails to the American West from 1841 to 1865. Through these eyewitness accounts she gives voice to the children's experiences and their active roles on the westbound wagon trains.

Werner stresses the resilience of these children and young adults who had to overcome great hardship even on an ordinary overland journey. Accidents, disease, and death became familiar to every child who traversed the mountains, deserts, prairies, and rivers with their

families or in the company of other westward travelers. Yet the children showed their ability to adapt to the heat, cold, dust, danger, and lack of comfort. They performed important tasks, such as gathering wood and taking care of the animals, sometimes even taking the place of an adult during the progression of the months-long journey. Some, like the teenage mother Nancy Kelsey who walked barefoot over the mountains, the child survivors of the snow-trapped Donner Party, or the thirsty lot who managed to escape Death Valley, or Lorenzo Oatman who was wounded during an Indian attack and spent years searching for his sister, showed extraordinary courage and persistence in extremely difficult circumstances.

In these children's stories and the stories of many others, the author sees traces of the same strengths and sources of power that have helped high-risk children survive today. With the help of their families or kind strangers, pioneer children remained hopeful, active, cheerful, and secure, despite great adversity. In a world of increasing alienation and despair, Werner wants to set aside human weakness, selfishness, and failure, and celebrate life instead. She sees children like Mary Murphy, who could not overcome her terrible experiences in the Donner Party, as mere exceptions to the rule of surprising resiliency. One cannot help but wonder, though, about what must have been the many sad endings to the stories of pioneer children and adults alike. Still, Emmy Werner succeeds in portraying the timeless power of hope as the sustaining force behind all pioneer stories: a hope that helped children as well as adults survive their difficult journey West.

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