

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 2001

Women's Sense Of Place On The American High Plains

Cary W. DeWit

University of Alaska-Fairbanks

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



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

DeWit, Cary W., "Women's Sense Of Place On The American High Plains" (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2290.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2290>

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.

WOMEN'S SENSE OF PLACE ON THE AMERICAN HIGH PLAINS

CARY W. DE WIT

The men called it God's country—but the women asked, who else wants it?¹

The plight of women on the American Great Plains is a familiar one to anyone who has explored the region's history. Account after account exists of women during the early years of Euro-American settlement who suffered hardship, persevered, and triumphed, or who succumbed to homesickness, lost their children or husbands, and sometimes descended into madness.² The women's historical situation on the Plains has also been popularized in fiction and dramatized or romanticized in dozens of films.³ But what of today's Plains women?

KEY WORDS: *women, plains, immigrants, farming, gender roles, sense of place.*

Cary W. deWit is an assistant professor of geography at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, teaching courses on the regional cultures of North America.

Few sources describe women's contemporary experience of Plains life. Some works have given us a glimpse into the lives of exceptional Plains women, but explorations of the everyday experience of ordinary women are scarce.⁴ This article is intended to help remedy this lack of contemporary knowledge and to render one particular aspect of High Plains sense of place: the women's perspective.

Between 1991 and 1996, I conducted a field study of sense of place on the High Plains of western Kansas and eastern Colorado in an attempt to discover the contemporary experience of Plains life. I chose this area because it is one of the flattest, most featureless parts of the Plains and is relatively isolated from the influence of large cities and major transportation routes. Trees exist only where they've been planted, and population is sparse. I primarily used in-depth interviews with local residents to find out what they think and feel about living out there in small, isolated towns in the middle of a huge, flat landscape. I had not originally set out to make a distinction between men's and women's sense of place, but as my field work progressed I became more and more impressed with a fundamental

difference between the way men and women experience the region, both in its environmental and cultural aspects.

I found my participants through a technique ethnographers call "snowball sampling," which takes advantages of existing family, friendship, and professional networks to make contacts. In effect, an interview with one person led to more contacts, and each of those led to more potential participants. My sample included women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, economic levels, social groups, and differing degrees of education. Most were white Euro-Americans, which is a reflection of the region's population.⁵ I also interviewed Hispanic women, recent Mexican immigrants, one African-American woman, and one European immigrant.⁶ Among their occupations were farm or ranch wife, business owner, banker, teacher, convenience-store clerk, social worker, farmer, artist, cattle breeder, retiree, nurse, and school-bus driver. The group ranged in age from eighteen to seventy-five, in education from eighth grade to graduate degree, and included Catholics, Protestants, Mennonites, and Quakers. Some of these women were life-long natives, and many were natives who had left the area and later returned. The minority were immigrants from other parts of the country. As part of this study, I also interviewed a similar cross-section of men. In the following pages, I incorporate men's voices where they serve to emphasize the women's perceptions of the sense of place.

Interviews took place at the participant's home or place of work. After explaining the purpose of my study, I used some standard opening questions to initiate talk about the Plains, e.g., "What do you like about living here?" "How would you compare this place to other places you have lived?" "Why did you move here?" These questions served to get the participants talking, requiring only occasional probes on my part to keep the interview focused on the topic. This unstructured interview style was effective because of the difficulty of predicting what issues would most influence a person's sense of place. During the in-

terviews I used extensive notes as opposed to any other recording device since I had observed that tape recording would make many of my participants reluctant to be candid. These interview notes were later typed and analyzed for recurrent patterns concerning how the participants talked about their views of the Plains.

Overall, women and men tend to describe the experience of the Plains in different terms and to value different characteristics of Plains life. Women tend to praise the interpersonal qualities of life in the region, especially concerning family. They like the sense of community and the closer intergenerational relationships. In contrast, men typically emphasize senses of freedom, independence, and opportunity as the most positive aspects of Plains living. Women also tend to describe the High Plains as primarily a man's place, where work is a man's domain and job and recreation opportunities are scarce for women. They often find themselves more restricted to "traditional" female roles in work, home life, and community than they would in other places.

Among people who immigrate from other parts of the country, women's reactions are especially different from men's. On top of the pressure these immigrant women feel to play more traditional female roles than they have before, they suffer a certain amount of shock from being plunged into an unfamiliar culture and landscape. Frequently, they are not there of their own volition, having typically arrived because of a male's decision. Some of these immigrants never make a successful adaptation to Plains life, and many report that they would leave if it was their choice. Immigrant men, in contrast, typically find the place appealing and embrace a sense of widened horizons and expanded possibilities. They appear relatively undisturbed by the social isolation and the emptiness of the landscape. On the contrary, they often express a fondness for both.

The reasons for this divergence between Plains women and men, whether natives or

immigrants, are somewhat enigmatic. It is not just a matter of affection versus aversion. Even the many women who love living on the Plains appreciate qualities distinctly different from those mentioned by Plains men. The mystery is that women's responses to the High Plains, whether positive or negative, are so distinctly different from men's. On the face of it, the divergent reactions are understandable because traditional Plains gender roles place women and men in very different social situations. But it also seems that men and women have fundamentally opposing responses to the land itself. Men applaud a land calling to be worked, while women value close family ties and a safe, nurturing environment for children. Men see freedom, opportunity, and promise in the landscape, where many women see only emptiness and isolation. These seemingly gender-specific responses are especially interesting when one notes that a similar disparity existed between Plains women and men in pioneer times.⁷

TRADITIONAL MALE/FEMALE ROLES

A tradition of strong division between male and female roles persists today on the High Plains more so than it does in other contexts of American society. Men typically attend to farm, ranch, or business, while women tend to domestic duties and work as teachers, nurses, clerks, or secretaries. Outside influences have broken down the traditional gender divisions somewhat—a farm wife may be as likely to drive a tractor as cook, some families with girls will put them to working the fields, and some fathers may cook meals—but in many social realms female roles are still quite restricted. When gender boundaries *are* crossed, it is usually a case of women doing men's work; though women may work in the fields, men rarely take up domestic chores.⁸ Meal preparation, for instance, is nearly the exclusive domain of women and girls. When I shared meals with families, the wife usually prepared the meal, perhaps with the help of her daughter(s). When the meal was ready, fathers and sons sat at the table while the fe-

males furnished it. During the meal, mother or daughter often rose to fetch something, remove dishes, or bring another course. Afterward, the women cleared the table and cleaned up.

Of course, this sort of gender-based division of labor is evident elsewhere but, on the High Plains, exceptions seem rare. Plains residents who have come from outside the region or spent time outside are especially conscious of this contrast. For example, a young man back home from college remarked, "Growing up here I didn't realize the male-female roles were so strongly defined. I didn't notice it until I went away. I realize now we're kind of backward here."

Women's roles are closely circumscribed in the community context as well. This is evident in the division of labor on community projects. When a group of church members worked together on a construction project, men and teenage boys did the construction work while women showed up only to prepare meals and deliver snacks at designated break times. Even when women *do* share in traditional men's work, it is not readily acknowledged in Plains society. Women often contribute a great deal to running a family farm, but they rarely are recognized as farmers. As one woman put it, "Women farm but aren't farmers."⁹ One woman I interviewed on the High Plains owns and runs her own farm, but has trouble convincing people that she is, in fact, a farmer.

In social situations, women are expected to segregate themselves and to observe certain norms. One man told me that a woman's place is "definitely not in the coffee shop." Women's presence in such male venues is indeed rare. When they do appear, they always sit with other women. Women are almost never with the early morning coffee crowd or at the tables where men habitually gather. At parties as well, men and women gather in discrete groups. One woman I interviewed enjoys breaking into the men's group at parties to stir them up a bit and to demonstrate her contempt for such taboos, but she is not a Plains native, and

such odd behavior from outsiders is not taken seriously. Even in public conversation involving members of both sexes, egalitarianism fails to appear, and women tend to be accorded a lower social status. As an immigrant woman observed:

When we first moved there, men didn't talk to me directly. When I said something, they'd look at me like, "Oh, she speaks," then turn back to [my husband], but they never got over it.

Consistent with her observations, I noticed that in interviews with couples, women were deferential to the men present. When I arranged an interview specifically with a woman, I often arrived to find her accompanied by her husband. If I arranged to interview a couple, I was likely to find myself talking to the man by himself while the woman busied herself around the house or served refreshments. When a woman did participate in the interview, she tended to stay in the background, say little when asked direct questions, and look to her husband or boyfriend for guidance while answering. When I interviewed women separately, they were more candid and free with their answers than when accompanied by a male. With men, it did not seem to matter whether their spouses were present or not, and what the men said was clearly the last word.

The continued strength of traditional sex roles is also apparent in the resistance anyone who defies them meets in the community. A western Kansas man gave an example of a typical community reaction:

People were intolerant of a woman who got a nursing degree, decided she didn't want to be here, and got a divorce. They thought she should not have let new opportunities change her life.

Any departure from the traditional roles of wife and mother also are stridently discouraged. One woman, an immigrant to the Plains,

complained of the pressure she felt to conform to community expectations:

When I had Kathleen, people asked if I was going to quit work. When I finally quit, I got many congratulations for staying home with her, but people were not comfortable with us having only one child. One woman said she prayed for me to have more children. People would say, "You're such good parents; you should have more children," and "It's not healthy for a kid to be an only child."

I also learned about a local woman who had given up working as an artist at home (which had fit easily into her family structure) to take up the more time-consuming and typically male business of a cow-calf operation. "That really dismayed her mother-in-law," another woman told me. "She's also had trouble with people in town. They're not as friendly to her now."

A man taking up a woman's traditional work can also stir controversy. For instance, a western Kansas native who had moved to the city, married a woman there, and moved back with her also brought back some nontraditional habits. "His family couldn't believe he could fix his own lunch," a friend of his told me. I actually saw this man fix lunch myself, even as his wife sat at the kitchen table talking to me—a complete reversal of the usual situation. I had grown so used to men talking to me while their wives fixed lunch that it surprised me, too.

WORK AS A MAN'S DOMAIN

Most of the higher-paying employment on the High Plains is culturally defined as "men's work." This is partly a function of traditional male-female roles (women are encouraged to be stay-at-home mothers), often because a man's job is often what brings families to the area to begin with, and because most of the work available is traditionally men's work.

Men typically do most of the physical farming or ranching work, cattle feedlots primarily employ men, and most of the small-business owners in each town are men. The jobs left for women are often the stereotypical ones schoolchildren think of: teacher, nurse, secretary, clerk. All of these tendencies put women at a disadvantage. A western Kansas woman explained, "The pay scale for women in Tribune [Kansas] is dismal. The women breadwinners work in the courthouse or the school. Mostly women work in the courthouse, a few men for Weed Control, sheriff—men's things." Some women move to the area specifically to take teaching jobs, but many farm or ranch wives become teachers because that is all they can find to do on a professional level, in spite of what other training they might have. Thus, many teachers are on the Plains because of their husband's work, not because they set out to teach.

Exceptions certainly exist. I met women in such occupations as cattle breeder, school superintendent, and chiropractor, but I saw no female car mechanics, lawyers, physicians, or ministers. Based on the interview data, I suspect that a female in any of these traditionally male professions would not be easily accepted. In fact, a woman whose husband runs a local paper told me, "[My husband] and I decided to be co-editors and co-publishers. People make light of it, but some people will only talk to him." A teacher in western Kansas pointed out that professional jobs for women are a relatively recent appearance. "When I started here seven years ago," she said, "there were only two women administrators in this half of the state." Resistance to women in professional positions is also evident in comments about the continued inferior status of such women. "My mom had a big hassle at work," a high-school student told me. "The board she was on ignored her because her boss is a man, and they took his word over hers." A female school administrator addressed the problem more graphically:

They have a good-old-boy system here, and if you're a girl, you mess that system up. You may meet with male administrators once every two weeks, that's not close communication. When a male administrator tells you to do something, you better decide if you're going to do it or look for another job. The attitude is that a man has the degree and can do the job. For a woman—you have the degree, but can you do the job?

Recreational opportunities also are limited for women. Some of the things men listed as most attractive about Plains life, such as opportunities for hunting and fishing, were of little interest to most local women. Golf is one example of a major leisure activity that engages almost no women. Although men and women laud the community spirit that instigated a home-built golf course in one town, the facility was created primarily by and for men. Some men even present the benefits of Plains life in terms of golf. A typical male comment is, "I can be here ten minutes after work, can come out here any day and play without waiting. Where else could I do that?" In contrast, women do not find such recreational convenience a major grace of Plains life. An immigrant who had married a local man plaintively admitted, "I took up golf. You have to take up what's available. I tried bowling. There's not much to do here for women."

Bars in small towns also are essentially men's places. The following interchange observed in a local bar illustrates:

The phone rang, and the bartender picked it up. He listened for a moment, then said, "Haven't seen him." After he hung up, a man at the bar said, "Was that my wife?" "Yeah. Did you want to talk to her?" "No." "I didn't think so."

This may well be a scene played out in many bars in many cities and small towns, but the

casualness and openness with which it took place was striking.

A DIFFERENT PLACE FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Women tend to experience the social and physical environments of the Plains in ways considerably different from the ways men typically do. Even the terms they use to describe Plains life and landscape are dissimilar. It is almost as if they are describing two distinct worlds. When asked what they value about life in the region, men regularly mention opportunity, freedom to work their own schedule, and easy access to recreation. In contrast, women more often speak of the quality of relationships. They praise the closeness of families, intergenerational ties, and the intimacy and helpfulness of the community.

The women are aware of and often mention the merits men see in Plains life but seem to regard them as the exclusive domain of males. They say things like, "Men like flexibility—they can do as much or as little as they want, careerwise," and "The freedom to set your own hours and be your own boss is appealing to our husbands." Women's failure to proclaim this flexibility, freedom, and independence of Plains life for themselves, however, suggests that they do not experience these qualities as much as men do.

Even among immigrants, male and female sentiments differ. In contrast to male immigrants, women are more likely to see deficiencies in life on the Plains. In one example, a western Kansas woman spoke of the struggle to adjust to High Plains life after living several years in the college town of Lawrence in eastern Kansas:

It was hard for me at first because I studied arts and all in college and knew I'd have to give all that up. It was hard to leave civilization, essentially; no concerts, no cultured people. Men are different; they welcome an opportunity for pioneering. Men like it—it's the women who can't hardly take it.

An eastern Colorado woman (she and her husband were originally from the South) also illustrated this disparity. At first she said:

My husband always loved it here. He likes to hunt and fish. He used to get up at four in the morning, put on coveralls over his school clothes and go goose hunting before school. He likes just a few people, doesn't like crowds. He says he has to be good five days a week; the rest of the time he wants to do whatever he wants, so he likes privacy.

Then, almost as an afterthought, she added some of the interpersonal benefits women typically mention about Plains life: "The thing I really like is the people; they're open, honest, hardworking, sincere." She was an unwilling immigrant to the area and had several complaints about isolation, domestic inconvenience, and the landscape, but she had stayed essentially because her husband wanted to. She admitted, "I come from an old school; I thought that if my husband was happy, I was happy, and I guess I believe that."

One of the most striking contrasts between High Plains men and women lies in their differing affinities for solitude. Men, immigrant or home-grown, often report a strong preference for solitude and solitary activities. To them, the isolation of High Plains life means privacy and freedom from disturbance. Women, on the other hand, often experience the solitude as social isolation. "My husband could be a hermit," one woman complained. Another, who lives forty-five minutes from the nearest town, said, "You live out here, there's *no way* you don't enjoy company coming around." In contrast, when I asked a male farmer if he felt isolated living on the High Plains, he replied, "To me this isn't isolated. We have three neighbors within a mile. That's not isolated."

This discrepancy in how distance is viewed is especially strong between native men and immigrant women and appeared in clearest focus during dialogues between immigrant women and their native husbands. A good

example is a conversation I had with a man and wife who live on an exposed rise, overlooking a draw and the flatland beyond. No other house is visible from theirs. They had met outside the Plains and then moved back to his native land after they married. When I asked, "When you retire and move, do you think you'll seek the same seclusion you have here?" they replied:

Tom: Yeah, I like it this way. If you want company, you can invite them, but they don't drop in out of the blue.

Barb: No, I want neighbors.

Tom: [To Barb] We've got neighbors a quarter mile down the road! At least they're not at your back door all the time.

Barb: I wish they were a little more. I feel strange staying home on a Friday night; no kids, nothing on TV. I don't know what to do with myself.

Tom: [With palpable contentment] It's nice and quiet.

The difference between men and women in their regard for isolation is at least partly a matter of social milieu. For men, social contact in their home life is not an issue because it is almost guaranteed in their daily work. Men's work takes them out into the world. They travel to the fields, to town for parts and supplies, and to other farms to help out. They often work together with other men and, as a result, enjoy a lot of camaraderie. For women, on the other hand, social contact is more limited. Jobs for them are scarce, and traditional roles dictate that if only one spouse takes a formal job, it is almost certainly the man. The usual women's tasks—household maintenance and general support work for family—free up the men to spend uninterrupted stretches of time farming, helping neighbors, participating in local government, and so forth.

Doing this support work in itself precludes the kind of consistent socialization men enjoy. Because of the many responsibilities of household maintenance, women's social contacts during the day are often fleeting and

unstable. Meetings with friends or associates are infrequent, and likely to be interrupted at any moment by unpredictable family needs. Such women do not have nearly the consistency in social relations that men do. Men often follow a routine of work and socializing with the same people every single working day.

Men rarely mention their work as a necessary social outlet, but my interviews suggest that their expressed preference for solitude is largely a product of unacknowledged socialization on the job. They can believe that their family provides all the social contact they need because, by the time they go home each evening, they've already interacted with many other people. Women, in contrast, might *seem* more desperate for social interaction because they may see few people beyond family unless they make a special effort to do so.

Women on the High Plains appear to be well aware of the socialization opportunities connected to work, and some say this is the principal reason they have sought jobs outside the home. One woman in eastern Colorado explained, "I have a lot more freedom teaching than being a farm wife. The socialness of teaching is wonderful. You can feel really isolated here." Plains women, in fact, tend to see work as a privilege; they do not take its social benefits for granted. As a teacher in western Kansas admitted, "If I stopped teaching, I'd lose contact with a lot of people I respect and who I have things in common with to talk about." According to some women, a job can make all the difference between a sense of community or numbing loneliness. As one woman put it, "I would definitely feel isolated without work. Without work, there's nothing. It's definitely different here for men. They have work."

REACTIONS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Men and women often have contrasting reactions to certain aspects of the Plains environment. Reports of feeling vulnerable or overwhelmed in the vast landscape are limited

almost exclusively to women. Immigrant women as well as natives describe this experience. A western Kansas woman originally from Kansas City recounted, "When I first came here, I felt really vulnerable because there were no trees. I would drive down to Garden City, get under those trees, and say, 'Whew, safe at last!'" References also were made to a woman originally from New York City who sometimes feels compelled to stay indoors because she "can't stand it out there." Outsiders who visit the Plains can have similar experiences. An immigrant from the East Coast told me his mother is terrified of driving on the Plains because it seems to her an unpopulated wilderness. She fears that if she had car trouble, no one would be around to help her. A woman native to western Kansas related a particularly poignant experience of assailability:

When I was fifteen, I was out in my dad's pasture. Right at that time crop dusters were spraying around the community. I saw this crop duster coming and was afraid I was going to get sprayed with dangerous stuff. I had this feeling then that I've never forgotten, that there I was in the middle of nowhere and there was nowhere to get away to, nowhere to hide, nothing to get under.

A woman who had moved to the High Plains from Wisconsin exemplified how deep this sense of vulnerability can be. She first described it in terms of town versus country: "I prefer living in town. I find a sense of security in town. In the country, I would feel alone with the elements and I wouldn't like that." Then she paused, stared into space for a moment, and said, "The vast nothingness . . ." as if it explained everything. She referred to this "vast nothingness" a few more times in the conversation, but when I asked her what she meant, she could not articulate it. She was not fond of this emptiness, but seemed deeply moved and impressed by it, as if she spoke of a charismatic figure who could inspire both awe and fear.

The wind of the High Plains also has a profound effect on many women. Several women specifically told me they do not care for its relentless presence. Both men and women allege that the wind actually bothers women more than it does men. Women native to the Plains seem just as affected as immigrants in this case, and again, their comments stand in contrast to those of men, who typically don't mention the wind or don't find it objectionable. One man, told me, "I like a hard wind; tumbleweeds greeting you is better than nothing." This male-female contrast is clear in the comments I heard from a native farming couple when I asked them how they liked High Plains life:

Bill: You won't get bored, that's for sure.

Karen: The wind is the only thing that's constant.

Bill: Well, not really. I hardly notice it anymore.

Karen: [In a sudden burst, as if anxious to talk about it] I always hated the wind. I like to say it blows cobwebs around in my mind. Other women I've talked to don't like the wind. I don't notice men complaining so much, except when it threatens the wheat, or cowboys at the feedlot, or during harvest.

Some women find incessant wind just plain maddening. An immigrant to eastern Colorado from Michigan bluntly stated, "I hate the wind." An immigrant woman in western Kansas vividly conveyed the lengths to which wind can drive women:

I don't like the wind. It doesn't just mess up your hair; you have to hang onto your car door. It makes me grumpy and makes me angry. In *Centennial*, a woman goes crazy and kills her kids because of the wind.¹⁰ When it's blowing, I think: "Yeah."

A Santa Fe woman who visited her boyfriend's hometown on the High Plains issued the strongest outsider reaction I heard:

We were at this ball game in Dodge [City], and the wind was blowing so hard I finally couldn't stand it. I stood up and told Bill we had to leave *now*! I was going to scream. If I had to stay out there another minute, I was going to scream!

THE EXPERIENCE OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Many women on the High Plains are "imports" who have made their way there by marrying local men. The couples often meet and marry outside the region when in college, or during the husband's military service. In some cases, the new wives know from the start that they will be moving to their husband's home turf. In others, the home place's draw on the man comes later, when outside life loses its luster or when the family farm comes available. The wife in this case may protest the move and afterwards may or may not adjust and accept. In any case, the High Plains tend to be physically and culturally tougher on immigrant women than on their locally-raised counterparts. A minister made this observation when asked if he saw a different attitude toward High Plains life among immigrant women:

Yeah, I think so, especially if they came out here with a husband who comes back to farm. Especially if they're used to city entertainment. There's not much social life here unless they want to go down to the Presto [convenience store] and join in the coffee club. Women who've grown up on a farm and choose to stay can't imagine being anywhere else. Those who come from a more populated area—they feel lost.

Immigrant women often assert that they live on the High Plains only because their husbands do. Several women I met said outright that they would not live there if it were up to them. For instance, a woman originally from the West Coast stated, "I would not pick this; I would go back there in a day if I could choose." Some women go so far as to say that,

in the event of their husband's death, they would leave immediately. Others are ambivalent, and not entirely at peace with the place but feeling committed to relationships that have grown there. For example, when I asked an eastern Colorado woman if, given the opportunity, she would return to her native South, she answered without hesitation, almost before I finished the question: "In a heartbeat—if my husband would go or if something happened to him." After a moment's thought, she qualified her answer. "I don't know if I'd really go, because I've been here so long, this is home." A woman in western Kansas expressed a similar ambivalence:

I was born in western Washington. My folks moved out here. Now I'm married to a farmer. I lived other places before coming back here. I'd like to live in a metropolitan area, closer to a mall. I like ballet, too. There was a time when I would have done anything to get out, but now—I've been here so long.

She uttered the last phrase with a palpable tone of lament.

A newcomer accustomed to urban society can have special trouble adjusting to High Plains life. Not only is she a stranger but she is plunged into an unfamiliar social milieu, where expectations may be very different from what she's know before. She may find, for instance, that she (and any daughter she may have) is expected to concentrate on domestic tasks and to give up any professional or other authority she may have enjoyed in the outside world. Culture shock in such circumstances is very real. One woman of urban origin complained that she could not get used to such different priorities and social customs on the Plains:

I initially hated it. The first couple of years were really rough. It was a culture shock. I'm a very private person. People wanting to know my business bothered me. I didn't want to give it. The things they put great importance on are different. The whole

town revolves around sports. Agronomy. An absolute obsession with the weather. Not wanting to deal with something new and different, unless it's a new tractor.

Immigrant women also note what they consider a relative absence of emotional support on the Plains. They complain about the reluctance of natives to express feelings, show vulnerability, or talk about emotional problems. Men, immigrant or native, note this characteristic, too, but only as an abstract observation, never as a personal complaint. Support in times of emotional stress is by no means absent from the Plains, but both men and women agree that it occurs primarily in material form. A woman originally from western Colorado observed:

The community here would help you in a minute in a crisis situation. A guy got hurt building his house, and his neighbors are going to finish it for him. But if anything happened to my husband, I could never pour out my soul to them because I'm not close to any of them, because I'm an outsider.

A woman who had grown up and lived much of her life in large cities also noted the Plains paradox of concrete versus emotional support:

The positive aspect is that anybody will help us. If we needed something done, there are two hundred people we could call on who'd be there. If you have emotional trouble, though, it's hard to find people to help. Families help each other a lot, but they're not emotionally very close. I've found only three or four people I can count on for emotional support.

For outside women who marry native men, another source of culture shock is the plunge into an unfamiliar system of family dynamics. Ironically, their deprivation of emotional support is accompanied by an overdose of family "closeness," which on the High Plains often turns out to mean frequent contact rather than

emotional closeness. One immigrant who had married a local man complained, "Sometimes the closeness really is stifling. When we make a decision, we have to discuss it with the whole family. I have to get permission to blow my nose." Another protested:

It's way too close for comfort. I'd come home and my mother-in-law would be here. My mother-in-law always felt incredibly comfortable in my house and never understood why I wasn't always at hers. I know other women from outside who've had a problem with that, and where it's caused family problems. This house has few windows because the previous owner wanted to keep his mother-in-law out.

Immigrant women voice most of the overtly negative and all of the most rancorous reactions to the High Plains landscape. The words immigrant women choose to describe the landscape were revealing. They frequently employ such bleak terms as "barren," "desolate," "horrible," "ugly," "edge of the earth," "end of the earth," and "end of the world," whereas locally raised women, and men, almost never use such strong words. Their responses may be partly due to the fact that so many of them have followed men to this part of the country rather than come of their own volition. Men often see adventure and interesting opportunity in the landscape, while many women simply see a wasteland. Aside from their objections to being dragged to a new place by their husbands, I suspect that many women have more of an aversion to the Plains simply *because* they are women. Maybe it is because of a gender-based tendency to relate differently to landscapes,¹¹ but I found many women who pointedly dislike the environment, while men, whether natives or immigrants, are typically indifferent to it at most.

Even after years of residence, immigrant women can suffer from a sense of dislocation and landscape shock. When asked what she liked about the High Plains, a woman originally from California cheerfully related the

usual list of positive qualities (safety, friendliness, and so forth). When asked about the landscape, however, she suddenly became dispirited, and confessed, "It took me three years to adjust to the landscape and lack of greenery. I've learned to tolerate it." In another instance, I spoke to a woman raised on the West Coast who had moved with her husband back to his native western Kansas. She discussed the loss of her home landscape:

Having grown up on the coast, I find it hard [on the Plains]. You have a lot of freedom there [on the coast]. You could play on the water, in the mountains. I enjoyed being outside. It's closed-in here. You can drive forever and still be surrounded by dirt. The air here is stuffy. On the coast it's constantly cleaned. I like eastern Kansas better. Trees and lakes make me feel less confined, more like home.

She then qualified her discontent with "I'd rather raise kids here, though." I questioned her further, wondering about the sudden shift in emphasis, and she explained that the High Plains was a better, safer environment for kids. She did not sound convinced and, when I asked if her oldest daughter had been raised on the coast, she replied with distinct disappointment, "No, she's a *landlubber*."

Another immigrant woman, originally from western Oregon, had grown fond of the open spaces, but even after many years on the High Plains she had never become completely inured to the landscape. She said:

I've been here longer now than in Oregon. I like it well enough. It's home for me now. All my immediate family is out here. I don't know if I could move back now. I'd be far from my grandchildren. I've adapted to it.

Her last comment, "I've adapted to it," was delivered with a tone of resignation, leaving no doubt that, all else being equal, she would rather be back in Oregon.

Some women object more directly to the landscape. The lack of dramatic geographic features is a common complaint. A woman in western Kansas explained:

I grew up in the Rocky Mountains. It was really hard to come here. It took ten years before I felt I liked the flatland. I still hope some day to go back to the mountains. I know a family that moved to Colorado, then came back. They didn't like it, said they couldn't see anything. I said, "What is there to see here?"

Another woman from the mountains had a similar reaction:

This is a lot different from Colorado. It's just so barren out here. I like scenery. I like to see things. There's no scenery here, nothing to look at. We were driving to Garden City. I look out and tell my husband, "There's nothing. How did the Indians hide from anything? There's no place to hide!"

Women in eastern Colorado, which has fewer trees than western Kansas, had the strongest reactions to the land. One, originally from a well-wooded section of the country, explained that she had found positive things about the place but could never get used to the landscape:

I came here from East Texas to teach and thought I'd come to the end of the world. It was so flat, and no trees. I thought it was just horrible. I couldn't believe anyone would want to live here if they didn't have to.

Some imported women have more extreme reactions to the region, whether because of the isolation, the social climate, or the lack of scenery. I heard stories of immigrant women, tied to the area by their husbands, who simply could not stand life on the High Plains. A western Kansas woman told me of two such cases:

There are a lot of times where people have moved here and hate it. One woman—her husband loves his job here—she’s attempted suicide a few times. I knew another woman who married a local man and moved here. When her sister was planning to marry his brother, she called her up and told her not to come out here, even if it meant not marrying the man.

One woman told this story of a nonnative teacher who once lived in eastern Colorado:

A teacher from upstate New York came out here and married a farmer. What she was thinking, I don’t know. She hated it out here, *hated it*. After three or four years she told her husband, “If you ever want children, we’re leaving because I am *not* raising children here.” He was determined to stay, but she finally talked him out of it. I never saw her in such a good mood as those last two months before they left.

COMPARISONS TO THE PIONEER EXPERIENCE

Euro-American women in pioneer times had much the same reaction to the Plains as do today’s female immigrants. In fact, the historical accounts of Euro-American women encountering the Plains bear a remarkable resemblance to the sentiments expressed by today’s High Plains women. The specific experiences they describe in the preceding pages, such as restrictive gender roles, contrasting senses of freedom and opportunity, social isolation, and distaste for the landscape, all appear in historical literature and even in historical fiction.

The High Plains, as we have seen, can be a very different place for men and women. Historical accounts suggest that many of the same differences in status and experience between Euro-American women and men existed in pioneer times as well.¹² As is the case today, men had relative freedom to come and go, to seek adventure, and to seize opportunity, while

women typically were confined to the home, felt vulnerable and alone, and dealt with the more mundane aspects of Plains life. They rarely were accorded due recognition for the share of “men’s work” they did and otherwise were restricted by Victorian values to strictly defined female roles. They shouldered all domestic responsibilities, deferred to men, kept quiet in public, and kept their emotional turmoil to themselves, as many High Plains women do today.¹³ Plains historian Walter Prescott Webb offers a compelling description of the pioneer situation:

The Great Plains in the early period was strictly a man’s country—more of a man’s country than any other portion of the frontier. Men loved the Plains, or at least those who stayed there did. There was zest to the life, adventure in the air, freedom from restraint; men developed a hardihood which made them insensible to the hardships and lack of refinements. But what of the women? Most of the evidence, such as it is, reveals that the Plains repelled the women as they attracted men. There was too much of the unknown, too few of the things they loved. If we could get at the truth we should doubtless find that many a family was stopped on the edge of the timber by women who refused to go farther. A student relates that his family migrated from the East to Missouri with a view of going farther into the West, and that when the women caught sight of the Plains, they refused to go farther, and the family turned south and settled in the edge of the timbered country, where the children still reside. That family is significant.¹⁴

Webb’s description could as easily serve to describe the contrasting experiences of men and women on the Plains today. Many contemporary women, especially immigrants, have a general predisposition against the Plains that is curiously lacking in men. This polarity existed between Euro-American pioneer men and women as well. The diaries of women crossing

the Plains in the nineteenth century, for instance, indicate that they often saw only desolation when they encountered the Plains, while men saw beauty and promise.¹⁵ One contemporary High Plains woman even suggested that the divergence between today's men and women in their reactions to the region directly correlates to the pioneer experience:

I think about the pioneer women. I look out and see the openness and think of how there were even less trees back then. I think what it must have been like to be walking—like going nowhere. And the man saying, "Yes, we're gonna find a place to settle and conquer!" and the woman is just [slumping in her chair in an expression of hopelessness]: "When will it end?"

The current situation of many High Plains women—having migrated to the area against their better judgment and now feeling shackled there by their husbands or husbands' livelihoods—also has parallels to the past. In the nineteenth century, male pioneers seemed to relish the possibilities inherent in the open country while their wives vigorously protested leaving civilization behind. In many cases optimistic husbands unilaterally made the decision to head west (as they sometimes do today), and women were dragged against their will across the prairies.¹⁶ Like today's immigrant women, they often pined for their original homes or at least for more hospitable landscapes.¹⁷ Many women remained on the Plains only with great anger and resentment toward their husbands. Thousands deserted their husbands, and census figures show that more nineteenth-century western women sought and obtained divorces than did women in other parts of the country.¹⁸ Twentieth-century Plains women attest to all the same tribulations today, though their lot is not as severe as it was for pioneer women. Today's women are not as restricted as in the past, and those who stay on the Plains, more often than showing anger and resentment, simply admit their longing for greater social contact, di-

verse cultural activities, and richer landscapes. Still, today's women, like their predecessors, sometimes meet immigration to the Plains with refusal, resentment, desertion, or divorce.

The social isolation some women suffer on the Plains today was also a hardship in pioneer times. Pioneer women described in their diaries feeling confined to the homestead and socially isolated, especially from other women.¹⁹ Meanwhile, men found fellowship in their daily rounds and "were often gone from home for long periods of time, chasing Indians with the local militia, hunting and fishing, making trips to the nearest settlement for supplies, driving stock to market, or working at other jobs in order to earn money to support the family."²⁰ Men and older boys could be gone for six months at a time, often leaving women with a houseful of small children. The burden of keeping the household in order while the men "adventured" outside was sometimes overwhelming.²¹

The physical environment also took its toll on pioneer women, much as it does on women today. Contemporary women regard the wind, for instance, as an enemy, and generally find it more disturbing than men do. Historical accounts exist of wind making women "nervous" or even driving them crazy.²² The most vivid examples occur in fiction, such as Dorothy Scarborough's *The Wind* or James Michener's *Centennial*.²³ One High Plains woman even drew a parallel between contemporary and pioneer women's feelings about the wind, saying she could empathize with a character in *Centennial* who, she said, "goes crazy and kills her kids because of the wind."

Time also has done little to change women's reactions to the Plains landscape. Contemporary and pioneer women's assessments bear striking similarities. The emptiness, isolation, and treelessness of the Plains heavily burden many High Plains women today, and these same qualities bore down upon some pioneer women as well.²⁴ Present-day women also describe feeling "vulnerable" or "exposed" in the open landscape or, as one said, feeling that there is "nowhere to get away to, nowhere to

hide, nothing to get under." This effect also could unhinge women in pioneer times. A classic example lies with the fictional character Beret Hansa in Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, who complained repeatedly on the Dakota Plains of "nothing even to hide behind" and who was eventually driven mad by this sense of vulnerability.²⁵

Life for today's women on the Plains is by no means a predominantly negative experience, even though the preceding pages may leave that impression. In fact, the experiences contemporary women report are overwhelmingly positive. Nor were delight and satisfaction absent from the lives of pioneer Plains women.²⁶ This study emphasizes the negative only to point up where women's experience diverges from men's. Although most of their comments are positive, today's women, whether immigrants or natives, are much more likely than men to find fault with Plains life.

The disparity between men's and women's experience of the Plains is a topic worthy of more attention. The remarkable strength and consistency of these disparities became clear to me only late in the development of a larger study.²⁷ The similarities between pioneer and contemporary women in their reactions to the Plains environment is especially interesting. The present descriptions of social and cultural deprivation, sense of vulnerability, aversion to wind, and landscape shock all mirror those of the region's original female Euro-American immigrants. In many ways, modern immigrant women are in a parallel situation to their predecessors, especially in that men typically have dragged them out there, seeing opportunity where the women see only emptiness and deprivation. Contemporary women occasionally make the comparison explicit and also allude to it by their frequent use of frontier terminology (such as "pioneering" and "conquering") to describe the men's outlook. The forces that drew men and repelled women from the Plains in the past apparently still operate today. One implication is that cultural gender definitions have remained the same in this regard even as Plains society has modernized.

Aside from the readily apparent explanations for men's and women's different experience of the High Plains, there remains an element of mystery in the region's ability to simultaneously be so appealing to men and so unattractive to women. This contrast's apparent tendency to remain consistent from the nineteenth century to the present also suggests that a gender distinction may be deeper than any single cultural milieu. Perhaps, as some research suggests, men have an innate preference for open landscapes and women for shelter.²⁸ Or perhaps women are culturally imprinted with an aesthetic sense distinctly different from men's. In any case, an attempt to decipher the ultimate causes of these differences is well beyond the scope of this work. Let it suffice to recognize the male-female contrast as one of the characteristics of Plains life that in its own way offers insight into the Plains experience.

NOTES

1. Wright Morris, *God's Country and My People* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 3.

2. Christine Stansell, "Women on the Great Plains, 1865-1890," *Women's Studies* 4 (1976): 87-98; Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); John Mack Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly*, 33 (1981): 537-57; Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981); Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 30-95, 130-57; Glenda Riley, *A Place to Grow: Women in the American West* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1992), pp. 197-231; Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, rev. ed. (New York: Schocken, 1992).

3. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917); Lorna Doone Beers, *Prairie Fires*

(New York: E. P. Dutton, 1925); Ole E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper, 1927); Ole E. Rølvaag, *Peder Victorious* (New York: Harper, 1929); Frank L. Baum, *The Wizard of Oz* (New York: Scholastic Book Service, 1953); Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953); Hamlin Garland, "A Day's Pleasure," in *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York: Harper, 1899; reprint, New York: Signet, 1962), pp. 173-81; Hamlin Garland, "Lucretia Burns," in *Prairie Folks: Or, Pioneer Life on the Western Prairies* (Macmillan Ltd., 1899; reprint, New York: Garrett, 1969), 83-117; Dorothy Scarborough, *The Wind* (New York: Harper, 1925; reprint, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); Carol Fairbanks and Sara B. Sundberg, *Farm Women on the Prairie Frontier* (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1983), pp. 91-120.

4. Some works dealing with the experience of contemporary women on the Plains are Linda Hasselstrom, *Going Over East: Reflections of a Woman Rancher* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum, 1987); William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairieErth* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991); Dayton Duncan, *Miles from Nowhere: Tales from America's Contemporary Frontier* (New York: Viking, 1993); Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1993).

5. See Michael H. Agar, *The Professional Stranger* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 124, and H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1988), 98, for a discussion of this method. The population in my study area was 93 percent Caucasian according to the 1990 census. *Kansas Statistical Abstract* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas Institute of Public Policy and Business Research, 1997).

6. This essay presents little in the way of comments by the Hispanic and Mexican women in my sample because of their experience of High Plains life focused so much on language barriers, cultural contrasts with the white population, and other problems distinctive to non-European immigrants. The economic and political reasons many Mexican immigrants have for coming to and staying on the High Plains are very different from those of the Euro-American population, and deserves fuller treatment elsewhere. Native Americans made up less than 0.5% of the population in the area investigated. Unfortunately no Native American women were accessible in this study.

7. Contemporary and pioneer women's descriptions of life on the Plains are similar in many ways to those of rural American women in general. Sachs and Bly report many experiences of contemporary rural women that are similar to those I found on the High Plains. Carolyn E. Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, N.

J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), pp. 78, 90, 115; Carol Bly, *Letters from the Country* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). Some authors suggest that the physical environment has had less impact on women's experience than have their traditional roles in the farm household, thus denying an experiential distinction between the Plains and other rural areas. Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), pp. 2, 195. My work challenges this view, at least where contemporary women are concerned. Plains women experience much more social isolation and cultural deprivation, and more restrictive gender roles, than do women in other rural areas because of the relatively low population density and because of the greater physical separation from services, entertainment, and urban popular-culture influences. Both women and men on the Plains have more extreme reactions to the landscape, whether positive or negative, because the flat emptiness so dominates visual experience.

8. This tendency of women, but not men, to cross the gender-labor boundary has its basis in the traditions of the early white settlers of the Plains. See Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora, "Structure of Agriculture and Women's Culture in the Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (fall 1988): 200-201.

9. Women farmers are typically overlooked in studies of American farming; census figures put women at 5 percent of all farmers, but 55 percent of farm women in a US Department of Agriculture survey considered themselves main operators. Sachs, *Invisible* (note 7 above), p. 75. Also see Jellison, *Entitled* (note 7 above), pp. 177-79; Fink, *Agrarian* (note 2 above), pp. 64-69.

10. James Michener, *Centennial* (New York: Random House, 1974). A historical novel about the settlement of Colorado.

11. See Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); idem, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

12. Flora and Flora, "Structure" (note 8 above).

13. Faragher, "History" (note 1 above), p. 551; Stansell, "Women" (note 1 above); Miner, *West* (note 1 above), pp. 152-54; Riley, *Female* (note 7 above), p. 76; Schlissel, *Diaries* (note 1 above), pp. 12-13; Fink, *Agrarian* (note 1 above), pp. 64-67.

14. Walter P. Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), p. 505.

15. Schlissel, *Diaries* (note 1 above), p. 53.

16. Schlissel, "Women's Diaries on the Western Frontier," *American Studies* 18 (spring 1977): 88, 95; Stansell, "Women" (note 1 above), p. 90.

17. Miner, *West* (note 1 above), p. 154; Julie Roy Jeffrey, "'There is Some Splendid Scenery': Women's Responses to the Great Plains Landscape," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (1988): 72-73.

18. Riley, *Place* (note 1 above), pp. 201-2.

19. Myres, *Westering* (note 1 above), pp. 167-70; Riley, *ibid.*, p. 202; Fink, *Agrarian* (note 1 above), p. 55.

20. Faragher, "History" (note 1 above), pp. 548-50; Myres, *ibid.*, pp. 170-71. For an example from fiction, see Garland, "A Day's Pleasure" (note 3 above).

21. Miner, *West* (note 1 above), pp. 153-54.

22. Riley, *Place* (note 1 above), p. 202.

23. Scarborough, *Wind* (note 3 above); Michener, *Centennial* (note 10 above).

24. Fairbanks and Sundberg, *Farm* (note 3 above), p. 44; Jeffrey, "Splendid" (note 17 above), pp. 73-74.

25. Rölvaag, *Giants* (note 3 above), pp. 29-38.

26. Riley, *Female* (note 7 above), pp. 94-98; Peg Wherry, "At Home on the Range: Reactions of

Pioneer Women to the Kansas Landscape," *Kansas Quarterly* 18 (1986): 71-79.

27. Cary W. de Wit, "Sense of Place on the American High Plains" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1997).

28. Some studies of male-female contrast in landscape tastes have concluded that men prefer open landscapes more than do women, and that women prefer more richly vegetated landscapes than do men. David Lowenthal, "Environmental Perception Project: Relevance of Research Hypotheses for Environmental Design," *Man and His Environment Newsletter* 1 (1968): 3-6; Judith H. Heerwagen and Gordon H. Orians, "Humans, Habitats, and Aesthetics," in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson (Washington, D. C.: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 1993), pp. 150-53; Joseph Sonnenfeld, "Environmental Perception and Adaptation Level in the Arctic," in *Environmental Perception and Behavior*, Research Paper 109, ed. David Lowenthal (Chicago: Department of Geography, University of Chicago, 1967), p. 48. Also see Jay Appleton's "Prospect and Refuge Theory," in *The Experience of Landscape* (New York: John Wiley, 1975).