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Review of *Long Vistas: Women and Families on Colorado Homesteads* by Katherine Harris

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Long Vistas: Women and Families on Colorado Homesteads. Katherine Harris. Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1993. Charts, photographs, and references. xii + 216 pp. \$24.95.

Long Vistas is a charming odyssey which begins with Katherine Harris's own experience of western women's history and moves on to a well-written, thorough exposition regarding women homesteaders in Colorado. Harris

starts with background material on the homesteading endeavor, including a discussion of railroads and water problems. About one-third of the way in she turns to women, presenting statistical charts of women's marital status, fertility, and "proving-up" rates.

This segment provides an excellent social history of women homesteaders, explaining what they brought, how much they spent, what kinds of houses they built, and what disasters they confronted. Harris has done meticulous research in women's source materials and uses it effectively to flesh out the female homesteading story.

About two-thirds of the way through, Harris turns to her oft-stated, but as yet unproven thesis that homesteading empowered women in families and society. Unfortunately, this is the weakest section of the study. Although Harris alludes to "subtle changes" (p. 119) in women, she fails to give specific examples. She also makes such unsupported statements as "the sharing of responsibilities by men and women in organizing community projects and entertainments helped create the conditions that led to homesteaders' approval for women's voting rights and their election to public office" (p. 129). Harrison similarly maintains without documentation that although "custom still assigned many homestead tasks on the basis of gender," shared work provided "more opportunities to experiment with gender roles."

What is most problematic here are the basic assumptions underlying this section. Women performing "men's work" did not automatically lead to explorations in gender roles, nor to shared decision-making or to changed consciousness on the part of women who usually saw themselves as "helpers." Neither did domesticity equate to some form of exploitation, as Harris inadvertently suggests. Women in domestic roles *were* partners; they were artisans who made finished goods out of raw materials that men supplied. To believe that women gained empowerment through performing men's work demeans women's work and hastens women's co-optation into a male-designed and oriented system.

Other questions remain unexplored as well. Women exercised power in such matters as types of housing in many kinds of families so how does this demonstrate change in homesteader marriages? If gender roles did indeed alter, *why* did men fail to reciprocate by regularly performing "women's work"? Why did both mothers and fathers refuse to leave family land to daughters? Is not the presumption that "the close association with father caused daughters to internalize, to some extent, male role models" (p. 132) just another stereotype that men wielded power, while women had no power of their own?

The lack of analysis seems to stem from a selective and under-utilization of the women's history literature, which would have helped reveal the complexity of the issues. Moreover, single and married women homesteaders are blurred together, so that questions of power, independence, and autonomy are seldom separated from marital constraints. Harris's study thus tells us far more than we knew about women homesteaders, but leaves the larger issues unresolved. **Glenda Riley**, *Department of History, Ball State University*.