

# Women and the California Gold Rush

By

Kimberly McKeever

Senior Seminar: HST 499  
Professor Benedict Lowe  
Western Oregon University  
June 16, 2006

Readers  
Professor Max Geier  
Professor Melinda Jette

Copyright © Kimberly McKeever, 2006

The California Gold Rush of 1848 was an event in American history that radically changed the lives of women. The women who were impacted were not only women of Anglo descent but included a diverse group of Latina, Chinese and Native American women who previously immigrated to the area. This diverse group of women also included women from different classes. The women present during this time in California experienced a new awakening of female empowerment, adventure, danger and a new lifestyle. Women from all different backgrounds, cultures and ages flooded into California in the late 1840's. The purpose of the trip to some was to keep the family together. Others came for independence and adventure, and for some, California was already home. Men, by the thousands, came to California in search of gold. Along with the men came women and children. Often the women are overlooked in this period by historians. Their role, though, was and is historically significant. The female diversity and presence was essential to this era in California's history. The perspectives of women from this period are crucial in understanding how the women's sphere was shaped and influenced by the environment, experiences and new life that they were a part of forming. Due to the gender imbalance, need for services and the ideology of cultivating a new land, women were able to prosper from the California Gold Rush, both monetarily and through the creation of a new culture.

The California Gold Rush was a historical event that has been closely examined and analyzed. Throughout the years the attitudes and interpretation of the event have changed. As the different analyses of the Gold Rush have expanded their view and scope to include women, a new perception of this period is available. In the years directly following the Gold Rush, the 1850's and later, the inclusion of women in written history was very limited. Due to the changing role of women in American society prior to the Second World War, a venue was

established to re-establish the history with women as a greater focus. Historians like Glenda Riley, Sandra Myres, and Susan Armitage created new interest and revitalized the subject of the women's roles in the Gold Rush. Their historical research showed that even though the gold rush was primarily a masculine event, women were present, as usual. The gender imbalance in California during the Gold Rush contributed to the misperception of an all male gold rush.<sup>1</sup> The inclusion, importance and presence of women during the California Gold Rush have been widely interpreted by many different historians and all of them lend their role in this history through their writings and analysis.

The history of the American West written prior to the Second World War is one full of mythology, including such items as a wild region, untamed, crawling with "feathered "Injuns", reckless gold-diggers, grim vigilantes, broncho-bustin' cowboys, and Mexican bandits."<sup>2</sup> In this except from a 1934 article, Howard Driggs exposed how the literature of this period influenced a false sense of the region. Driggs was well aware that the truth of the region was yet to be written. He identified the heart of the west as the ability to fully comprehend the human elements that were essential in the creation of the west's mythology, meaning how people shaped and were shaped by the land and the history.

The folklore that surrounds this period, though, was important in shaping the perceptions of this region. The sole mention of women in this article was found in a simple sentence near the end. It simply stated that the men and women who traveled west were an important part of shaping the history of the west. This small acknowledgment of women was very limiting. The majority of women did travel with their husbands, but this is not true for all the women. Women who made the journey and were unmarried did so going against traditional values and with a lot

---

<sup>1</sup> Nancy J. Taniguchi, "Weaving a Different World." ed. Kevin Starr, and Richard Orsi (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 142.

<sup>2</sup>Howard R Driggs, "The Heart of the West." *The English Journal* 23, no.3 (1934), 220.

of risk. Women were very influential in shaping the west, but they were excluded from much of the literature prior to the Second World War. There was a lot of scholarship written about the west prior to the war, but this scholarship focused on other topics besides women, like the environment and manifest destiny. Driggs was excluding women by narrowly writing on the subject, and through this omission gives a narrow view of western history.

One of the most important historians to uncover the feminine presence within the California Gold Rush was Glenda Riley. In her 1999 article, *Feminizing the History of the Gold Rush*<sup>3</sup> Riley went to great lengths to reveal the true nature of the gold rush and show who the participants really were in this history. Riley not only included women in the history of the gold rush, but unlike the earlier historians, she examined the role of women of non-Anglo descent. Through her scholarship, Riley further opened up the history by her inclusion of women of other races. The fact that women were absent from much of the history prior to the event was clear, but only recently has history been written that includes women, but now women of color and different ethnicity were being included. This is also the scholarship found in *Pacific Northwest Women* by Jean M. Ward and Elaine A. Maveety. This study examined the different experiences and cultures of women in the west. These two women historians examined how race, gender and class along with the geographical location impacted the lives of western women.<sup>4</sup> Race played a large factor in the inclusion into the topic of women's studies. Although inclusion was the strongest point for this scholarship, women of color and ethnicity were also being excluded. In the rush to include women, historians overlooked women of different backgrounds. Western history is not just about white women. Newer scholarship is including these women, but the work is very recent.

---

<sup>3</sup> Glenda Riley, "Feminizing the History of the Gold Rush." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 30 (1999), 445.

<sup>4</sup> Jean M Ward, Elaine A Maveety, *Pacific Northwest Women*. (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1995), 1.

In the eastern United States during the Antebellum period women were defined by strict rules and boundaries. The societal structure that was created in the Eastern United States was one built upon Victorian standards. Women were seen as inferior to men and were always to be in their assumed role. Class was a great distinction in the East as well. Women of lower class status were degraded even further. The social standards that plagued women were an integral part of Eastern culture and life. In the West though, they were free of that sphere to some degree. Women were allowed to venture outside their comfortable zone of femininity but this was temporary. The Dame Shirley is a good example of an upper class Anglo woman who experimented with gold panning.<sup>5</sup>

The Anglo women that came out west to California and places like San Francisco from New England encountered an entirely different life and world than they had ever known. Unlike the Native and Latina women who were accustomed to the environment and rural life, the Anglo women had to adjust. Life in the east was not always easy, but there were a lot more accommodations. Where they came to inhabit was an area that had to be created from scratch. The life that Eastern women had known previously was gone, along with all their barriers and social standards. Society and culture was now what they created it to be, there were no traditions except the baggage that they carried with them from their old lives. The journey out west though stripped most women of their old ways. The trip west was full of hardship for the women and was a test of their true strength.

As men and families journey westward toward California, women were more equal with the men. Survival of the family was their objective. Through the new business opportunities and financial prosperity, California would create, this goal was achieved. Although only those with

---

<sup>5</sup> Carl I. Wheat, , *The Shirley Letters; from the California Mines 1851-1852*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1961)

funds could make the trip, the breakdown of the class system from the East diminished as well. Women's choice in moving west was minimized as was typical in most families. As the head of the household, the male made the decisions for the family. Although the women could have been consulted, the general consensus is that women were subservient to the husband.

Some women were excited about the prospect of a new life and new opportunities. One such woman was Mary Jane Megquier, the wife of a prominent Maine doctor. Mary Jane and her husband, Thomas Lewis Megquier, set out to secure a doctors office and drug store in San Francisco. Along with the prosperous business that Thomas created in San Francisco, Mary also made a sizeable income for the family by running a boarding house and serving food to the patrons.<sup>6</sup> Prior to sailing Mary Jane Megquier wrote to her friend Milton telling him of her excitement. Mary Jane was hopeful of the trip and the environment awaiting them in California. It was clear that the intentions of Mary Jane differ greatly from those of most travelers. She realized that the trip would be difficult but the prospects of making money, not from gold, but through her profession were evident. Mary Jane believed that the women in the West were well appreciated and would be very helpful to her and her husband. Her outlook was so bright and hopeful. She was going for her family and mainly for her husband, who she refers to as "Dr." Leaving the children behind was painful for Mary Jane, but the necessity of wealth was overwhelming. Mary Jane's view of the trip was very optimistic but she realized the hardships they faced upon their journey.<sup>7</sup> Women knew that the trip would be a great hardship for the family. Their agenda was clearly different from that of their husbands. For the men the trip was one to make the man emerge. To show their masculinity and heroic nature this journey was

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert Glass Cleland, ed., *Apron full of Gold* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press 1949), vii.

<sup>7</sup> Cleland, 5-7.

needed.<sup>8</sup> This romantic version of the excruciating trip was commonly perceived as the man's obligation, to his family and to fulfill his destiny.

Men and women clearly had different images of the journey. Many women came to the West with their husbands and families in search farming and mining opportunities, just as other immigrants did. Women made the long hard journey alongside their husbands. Historian John Mack Faragher examined the role of women in connection with their husbands and families: "Men took their families to claim new, richer farmlands, to raise cash crops, and to exploit new markets (the mines, the Orient, or the ports of the world). These were men with dreams of success, but most were not yet successful."<sup>9</sup> Women's roles in the West were drastically changed due to this experience. The women were no longer dainty wives: instead, they became wilderness mothers, with the ability to fight off Indians, and farm while managing the homestead.

Women as primary caregivers were generally more concerned with sickness and diseases. Women were more focused on keeping the family together and surviving the wilderness. Men and women, once out on the trail and upon arrival had to break free from their traditional roles, as survival depended upon it. For women the transformation from traditional roles of subservience and dependence was challenging. The ideal Eastern woman was just the opposite of Western women. The culture of the East instilled into women and young girls how to act, move, how to contribute to the family and society. Glenda Riley examined the impact of what historian Barbra Welter called the Cult of True Womanhood. Welter identified four characteristics of women who embodied "true womanhood" ideals: they were piety, purity,

---

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Jameson, "Toward a Multicultural History of Women in the Western United States," *Signs*, 13, no4 (1988), 766.

<sup>9</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1979), 183.

submissiveness, and domesticity.<sup>10</sup> These goals were the building blocks of a lady. Becoming a lady in Eastern society was the objective of most women. Even women of lower class standings were aware of the desired characteristics of a female. Most of the women were not afforded the luxury of staying home and raising the children and supervising the home. The women who did not work were afforded this luxury by their husbands, who wanted everyone to see their ability to provide. The ideal woman was a societal construct beyond the reach of most women wanted to become.

The home was also an essential component of being a lady. The home was the sanctuary where the children were raised and the family was cared for. The home was the dominion of the women. This notion that the home was solely the task of the female was carried throughout the classes. Women, who labored all day with their husbands, still had to tend to the housework, including cooking and cleaning. The idea of separate spheres for men and women was upheld. This ideology that women were domestic workers was ingrained into the society. Due to the industrialization that took place so rapidly, the hardship of both duties was forced upon the women. Women did all the work that they were burdened with, and they still tried to be as lady like as possible. It was directly due to industrialization that women were forced to labor both at home and at a job. The dynamic of the employer, employee relationship was new for lots of women. They were no longer afforded autonomy.

Women suffered greatly to provide for their families and still uphold the social standards. Due to the ideas of separate spheres, women were categorized into proper roles. Women were supposed to uphold moral and social obligations while still fulfilling their family needs as well. This placed immense pressure upon women that was too much for some to deal with. Succumbing to the social pressures many women sought outlets for frustrations. While women

---

<sup>10</sup> Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman*, (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc. 1986), 68.



were discouraged from becoming involved in matters outside the home, not all followed the rules. Topics such as education and land ownership were important to them. Day laborers were not afforded the time to deal with these issues, but ladies who were at home keeping their traditional roles could.<sup>11</sup> Some women of the Gold Rush were able to participate in events and affairs outside the home. Many women, though, were busy with work or daily life, and issues outside the home were of little importance, except if the affair was social. Mary Jane Megquier references dances, dinners and social events with the upper class women of her circle in letters to her daughter.<sup>12</sup> This was typical of a woman in her standing, but for the lower class women this was not the case.

Some of the wealthier women could take on issues that were bothering them; a new sense began to develop for women. This new expression of ideas and opinions were not a part of the traditional role of a lady. The feminist ideas that women were developing was troublesome to the society. Women were the central figure in the home, where they needed to remain. Women were given undisputed reign over the home, this was in clear hopes that women would be too preoccupied to deal with matters outside the home. Women were still seen as the primary caregiver. This role was still intact. Even ladies, who had lots of time, were giving the care of the children to nannies. The role of primary caregiver was essential to all women.

Society dictated that women uphold the morals of the society. They were the ones to instill values and a good belief system into the children. The task of children was not taken lightly by women. Mothers realized that the future was in their children, whose character had to be carefully molded. Mary Jane Megquier was a mother first, that was evident in her correspondence. Leaving her children behind as she and her husband went to California was

---

<sup>11</sup> Riley, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Cleland, 48.

very painful for her. Mary Jane wanted her children with her, but that was not possible yet. She wanted to secure their business first, and then have the children join them later. The medical practice that they began ensured them prosperity. Separation of the family was very hard for any woman to accept and for Mary Jane she was heartbroken. Leaving New York for California though was their family's only option for a new chance at success.<sup>13</sup>

Jo Ann Levy's book *They Saw the Elephant*<sup>14</sup> (1990) shows the impact and roles that women played in the Gold Rush of California. The mythology that Levy explored and uncovered was apparent in all her examples of women that influenced the gold rush. Using primary sources such as journals, recipes and letters, Levy examined the lives of these women and showed the error in the common history written for the period of the late 1840's to 1850's. Women had a strong presence and they were not just the silent partner. They were, in a lot of cases, the strength that held families together, the connection to other families, and they were responsible for raising the future and for helping the family survive in this new place. Levy used primary sources, including women's diaries and letters, to dispel the myths that women did not play an integral role in this event.

America's history always features the masculine side of history. Women in their own right accomplished a lot. Like men, women helped to discover and cultivate the west. There is plenty of evidence in journals and correspondence to show how women were altered by this new land and how they forged a path for themselves and their families. In understanding how women were changed yet still connected to the structured New England society, it is essential to understand the emigration into the west.

---

<sup>13</sup> Robert Glass Cleland, ed., *Apron full of Gold* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press 1949), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Jo Ann Levy, *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1990)

The culture that was created in California was greatly affected by westward emigration. Anglo women were impacted by the journey and this influenced the lives that they created once reaching the gold towns. Women began their new outlook of Californian life on the trail. Even though they were still connected to their traditional roles, they could expand, and change them.

Glenda Riley's book *Women and Indians on the Frontier* deals with how women were changed by the unknown wilderness. Riley used this book to explore how women were changed, and why these changes were a shock to the traditional system. Riley's explanation of why women in the west were different was tied to the lack of tradition in this new land and the new type of culture that was created. This new culture was relatively new, as there were already inhabitants in the West, the newcomers; especially women were able to embrace their new freedom from tradition. Women were still seen as civilizers and their presence in the west was readily requested. Women that entered the region still had their core beliefs and morals and it was instilled in them by Eastern society. Women who did go west were said to marry easily and this message was portrayed and pushed through the media.<sup>15</sup> Riley's work in this book of how the role of women was affected by society was very new for historiography and this was new scholarship for its time.

Polly Welts Kaufman's book *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (1984) also depicted how the women of the west, school teachers in particular, were shaped by the literature and media image. This is very similar to Riley's explanation of women, even connecting with Riley's belief that single women were faced with a greater social obstacle. The women who taught school in the west were expected to uphold an image that was moral, discreet, self sacrificing and completely involved in teaching.<sup>16</sup> Kaufman wrote that women are far too often overlooked, and

---

<sup>15</sup> Glenda Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 116.

<sup>16</sup> Polly Welts Kaufman, *Women Teachers on the Frontier*. (London: Yale University Press, 1984), xvii.

this is true for women who were single school teachers. Kaufman believed that as the west expanded, so did the diversity of women and their placement in history is too large to be pushed aside. Levy, in writing her book, showed how the clarity of the female presence was comprehensible. Because of the historical portrayal of women in the California Gold Rush and in the history of the west in general, Levy dispels the mythology that women were present in the gold rush but they were there not only as wives, but as business women, prostitutes, journalists, and laborers.

The biased history that ignores women's role in this region is evident. Riley wrote that the women's presence was undeniable. There was clear evidence that women were present, and these women were not all of Anglo descent. They were working in unconventional ways, such as "newspaper editors and publishers, assayers, miners, saloon and shopkeepers, booksellers, milliners, and other small entrepreneurs."<sup>17</sup> Mexican women, especially, had good jobs, because they had inhabited this region for many years. Many Mexican women were profiting from the Gold Rush from the beginning of the gold fever. They were already present in the region and were a part of the experience from the first influx of pioneers and gold seekers to the region. The neglect of many primary sources available about the women of the gold rush has gone untouched. Riley gave examples of sources that could have been utilized in order to unearth the truth of the history such as: tax information, passenger manifestos and newspapers.<sup>18</sup>

Women in the Gold Rush expanded the definition of traditional roles. This re-defining of tradition by western women is a key component examined by Susan Butruille, who wrote about the experiences of women in San Francisco. Women in this area had to be very careful. If they were no longer considered to be a "true women" then they were left open to attack. Women that

---

<sup>17</sup> Glenda Riley, "Feminizing the History of the Gold Rush." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 30 (1999), 445.

<sup>18</sup> Riley, 445.

were considered “loose” or “free” could be killed, raped or beaten. These women embraced the Cult of Individualism, and they were stepping outside their proper roles.<sup>19</sup>

Glenda Riley believes that the failure to include women in western history is because of our own perception of the gold rush. “Conventional wisdom tells us that the gold rush was a male undertaking, or at least largely dominated by men. The California census of 1850 indicated that approximately 90 percent of the population was male. Women were present among the forty-niners in all roles in which one might expect to find them: as wives, mothers, sisters, consorts, prostitutes, entertainers, laundresses, cooks, and boardinghouse keepers. Wherever there were men, women were also found.”<sup>20</sup>

Susan Armitage does not think that it is our general consensus that allows the bias and exclusion of women from the gold rush, but, argues that it is due to the Turnerian belief that western history is about the struggle of the physical environment and not a struggle over gender roles. Other historians feel that women failed to make it in western history due to their position in the household. “The ‘real’ life of the West- the subduing of the environment- was men’s work that went on in public spaces, away from the household.”<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Jameson, along those same lines, argues that the doctrine of separate spheres categorized women and placed them into gender and ethnic-specific roles.<sup>22</sup> This meant that women were culturally bound to their roles as well. Women of all different backgrounds were creating a new life and culture, but they still had obligations to tradition.

---

<sup>19</sup> Susan Butruille, *Women's Voices from the Western Frontier*. (Boise: Tamarack books, Inc., 1995), 126.

<sup>20</sup> Riley, 445.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Armitage, “Men and Women in Western History: A Stereotypical Vision”, *The Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no.4 (1985), 383.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Jameson, “Toward a Multicultural History of Women in the Western United States,” *Signs*, 13, no4 (1988), 763.

John Mack Faragher's impression of women in the West was that many Anglo American women came to the West with their husbands and families in search farming and mining opportunities, just as other immigrants did. Women made the long hard journey alongside their husbands: "Men took their families to claim new, richer farmlands, to raise cash crops, and to exploit new markets (the mines, the Orient, or the ports of the world). These were men with dreams of success, but most were not yet successful."<sup>23</sup> Women's roles in the West were drastically changed due to this one view that women were no longer part of the mythology labeling the wives dainty; instead they became wilderness mothers, with the ability to fight off Indians, and farm while managing the homestead. This is just the opposite of Riley's view on women in the West. Riley argued that women were much more than just wives, they were an integral part of society and Faragher does not interpret women in the west in the same manner. Faragher took a much obvious approach to interpreting women in the Gold Rush by placing them there in a domestic situation as wives. Faragher included the image of women in jobs, not being independent of their spouses, but working in their husband's stores and businesses. Another view however, argued that women were not allowed to work in a laborious fashion. There were thought of as the jobs of men, and that women could not withstand hard work such as mining.

Although all women of the West, Anglo and Non-Anglo, did work and work hard they were not allowed to partake in certain businesses. There was money available, and even though women were not equally allowed to partake in the gold rush, they were able to benefit from it and prosper. Women found ways around these prejudices. "A woman dubbed "Mountain Charley", widowed and with small children to support, dressed herself in man's garb and held a man's job on the riverboat. In 1855, she joined an expedition from St. Louis to California, where she stayed until the spring of 1859. She visited her children for a few weeks and went on to the

---

<sup>23</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, (Yale University Press: New Haven 1979), 183.

Colorado gold rush, where she established a successful business and remarried.”<sup>24</sup> Even though women were faced with these barriers, many found ways to make money off the gold rush.

Since many men were spending money in excess many women took up making money from them in lucrative ways, from baking pies and selling them, or dancing with them at a price and even by selling themselves through prostitution. Some women used their talents and sex appeal to earn a living, and this was considered scandalous by the standards of “true womanhood”. Sarah Royce wrote in her journal that “Little girls and young ladies who sung, played, or recited on such occasions often received, thrown at their feet before they left the stage, expensive jewelry, or even pieces of coin. They commonly accepted them; often with looks of exultation.”<sup>25</sup> Condoning their behavior from behind the scenes were their mothers. This, to Royce, was unspeakable and righteously wrong: women were stepping outside their accepted roles, and corrupting the family unit. Family, to Royce, should be the core of their lives for most women.

One first-hand account of the gold rush, a letter written by “Dame Shirley” tells of her experience panning for gold and the general consensus of women and gold mining. She writes “I have become a *mineress*; that is, if having washed a pan of dirt with my own hands, and procured therefrom three dollars and twenty-five cents in gold dust.”<sup>26</sup> She recounts how she did this act and still remained ladylike, besides soaking her shoes and ruining a new pair of gloves.<sup>27</sup> The expectancy of the women’s role is one that required of them little accomplishment. The women were often forced into roles and decisions that their husbands made for them. “Dame Shirley” is a good example of the capabilities of women and the misconception of their abilities, but for men

---

<sup>24</sup> Riley, 446.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Royce, *A Frontier Lady* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 115.

<sup>26</sup> Wheat, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Wheat, 83.

it was difficult to come to this realization. Women in their minds were expected to adhere to traditional roles, mainly the “Cult of Domesticity”, that was so deeply ingrained.

Women who were previously afforded great luxury lost their comforts and to some degree civility in the Gold Rush. Like so many stories of struggle and hardships in the mining towns, Sarah Royce recalled, “the conveniences of civilized life, the comforts of home, can not be keenly appreciated, or even fully seen, by those who have never been, for a time, shut out from them.”<sup>28</sup> The adaptation of these frontier women to this new life was a struggle, and for the entire population that was migrating in general, this was also true. Men, though, were taught to embrace ruggedness and hardships better than women. Sarah Royce so prominently shows through her experiences that upper-class women were able to experience the exotic but still have the safety of their sphere.

Years later when Sarah Royce’s son Josiah, a leading philosopher and social critic, spoke many years later on the subject which his mother felt so strongly on, which were the morals of the encampments: “The frontier was a tester of moral codes. To the new country of California came the codes of Mexico and of China. But the mass of the Californians had been trained with more or less success in the moral conventions which characterized the life of the settled East...But on the frontier freedom reigned.”<sup>29</sup> Sarah Royce writes in her journals of the strong convictions she had on the subject of morals.

Royce, like too many of the God fearing women who she encountered in San Francisco, was shocked and appalled by men who tried to corrupt young women. Sarah was sure of the moral fiber she came from and “that while Christian women would forego ease and endure much labor, in order to benefit any who suffered, they would not welcome into friendly association any

---

<sup>28</sup> Royce, 103.

<sup>29</sup> Royce, 107.



who trampled upon institutions which lie at the foundation of morality and civilization.”<sup>30</sup> Sarah saw that the changing society was impacting men and women. She had valid fears for the future in California. For Sarah, a breakdown of the traditional lines in both sexes and families was catastrophic. This tragedy, she argued, would not have been tolerated in East Coast Society. Holding strong to her ideals, Sarah and her other female companions tried their best to enforce the standards she held so dear, only in vain, for the most part. This she discovered was a place of new traditions and new gender roles for women. Women were breaking free from the old New England standard for how they should live their lives under Puritan traditions and rules and laying a path for free thinking and openly choosing their actions.

The cult of domesticity, which was so prevalent in the East society, was not applicable in the West. Women did come with their families, but for the most part survival outweighed any ideals placed upon them by people that lived a world apart. With the distance of land women acquired a new attitude and outlook on how they could live. Women were bound to their families and communities, but they could make a living and fulfill their part in helping the family by shedding the traditional roles placed upon them. Susan Armitage uses the example of separate spheres to explain these roles.<sup>31</sup> Women were more involved in the affairs of the household traditionally. Men were involved with their jobs outside the home. Now in the West the women were more involved and they were more responsible for affairs outside and inside the home. Their responsibility was shifted to one of an outsider, to one of a participator. This active role in what was happening to these women gave them new power and responsibilities outside the home management. Women were few in number but their strength and power was felt.

---

<sup>30</sup> Royce, 114.

<sup>31</sup> Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Gold Rush Widows of Little Falls* (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Press, 1990), XI.

California was newly acquired as territory for the United States, in 1849. This land previously belonged to Mexico. Mexican inhabitants were present in the region and they were native to the land. Native American Indians also inhabited California. The roots of these two races were very deep in California. They were people who had lived and worked and inhabited the land for many years prior to the discovery of gold at Sutters Mill.<sup>32</sup> Once the news spread about the gold discoveries there was a massive influx of people to the region. Native inhabitants of the land became a useful labor force.

Mistreatment of Mexican and Native Americans was not unusual in California, especially during the Gold Rush. The women of these cultures were negatively viewed by many of the Anglo settlers and this image was to their demise. Severe mistreatment and exploitation rendered hatred and mistrust of the miners. "As California transformed, so did the lives of its women. The world of the Indian rancheria and Mexican rancho became surrounded and submerged by Yankee settlement."<sup>33</sup> The traditions and culture of the Mexican and Native Americans was decimated. Anglo settlers, who moved into the gold fields, only saw these people as workers.

The destruction of the family unit in these cultures was carried out swiftly. Anglo men treated the women as animals and did not find fault in assaulting them. Sexual assault was very common, leaving the woman destroyed. Women and family are central in Mexican and Native culture. By dishonoring the women; the Anglo's were disgracing their deep rooted heritage.<sup>34</sup> The women tried to adapt to this new culture. Anglo men, though, only saw non-Anglo women as laborers. Some of these women, if they survived, and adapted made a living off the miners.

---

<sup>32</sup> Gonzales, Manuel. *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Taniguchi, 142.

<sup>34</sup> Taniguchi, 148.

Prior to the influx of miners into the region, Mexican women worked the mines with their families and husbands. They tried to prosper from the event, just as the men were. Anglo men did marry with native women, the gender imbalance of the Gold Rush created the need for more marriageable women. Men that did not believe these women met their standards often discouraged the mixing of races and governmental policies that restricted the natives to reservations.<sup>35</sup> Mexican and Native women inhabited California for many years prior to the Gold Rush and it was directly due to this event that the women's lives were disrupted. California was home, and with the invasion of outsiders, this sanctuary was desecrated.

Riley explored the reasons that Anglo women went to California. She realized that not only were women present, but that they, too, had similar goals for going, like the men. The idea of prosperity was a common goal for the sexes. Both men and women worked hard, and women to some extent were pushed even harder. The social attitudes present during the gold rush were ones that did not promote women. The men expected tough and rugged women; the west was not a place that was associated with the femininity of the east. Women had to shed their past ideals of lifestyles and embrace the harsher one of the west. As these attitudes were too prevalent, women's assertion of their power and independence did not bode well. Riley explored the controversial topic of divorce,<sup>36</sup> which was not previously discussed in any great detail. Much of the topics and themes included in the more recent histories were topics that for many years following the gold rush were not a priority of discussion.

The work of Huping Ling focuses on Chinese women and their roles in California. Ling's *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*<sup>37</sup> (1998) is an in-depth look at the Chinese Women who inhabited the American west during the gold rush. Ling looks not only at women, but at Chinese

---

<sup>35</sup> Taniguchi, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Riley, 446.

<sup>37</sup> Ling, Huping. *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998)

women in particular. Chinese women had a large presence in the west. They came with their husbands, fathers and families to establish a new life in America, just like other women who entered this region, they were expected to shed their traditional values and adapt to this new culture and place.

The main driving force for the migration of Chinese women was economic. Like the men, they wanted to prosper and partake in the gold fever. Women saw the American West as a place of economic prosperity and success. The reasons, though, that Chinese women migrated have been a historiographic topic of debate among scholars. Some historians argued that there were internal problems in China where land concentration drove emigration. Others argued that it was the gold rush, flight from political persecution, and the search for economic opportunity. The main reasons, Ling argues, that women went to California and the American west involved both push and pull factors. Natural disasters and social problems gave the women no reason to remain. They were also pulled to the United States by their family ties and economic forces.<sup>38</sup> The inclusion of Chinese women in U.S. history is new. This field of women's studies is still being explored, and Ling points out that there are still vast resources of information about women and their experiences that have yet to be discovered. Ling's book is a good example of the evolving historiography on women in the American west.

In America, Chinese men far outnumbered Chinese women. In a society that valued men more than women, Chinese women were forced survive in a male dominated culture. Although with the new beginnings in America, Chinese women could have started over, many were indebted to men for passage and fell into the lifestyle out of necessity, and not by choice. "In 1852, of the 11,794 Chinese in California, only seven were women"<sup>39</sup> Numbers of women rose,

---

<sup>38</sup> Ling, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (New York: Penguin Group 1989), 121.

but it took a few years. Chinese women worked in a multitude of jobs, such as laundresses, housekeepers, servants, seamstresses, cooks, miners and fisherwomen, but the most prevalent career was that of prostitution. "In the 1870 census manuscripts, 61 percent of the 3,536 Chinese women in California had occupations listed as 'prostitute'".<sup>40</sup> The Chinese women were from a strict culture that valued a rigid class structure. For most of the women who were in this position, they were shamed to be placed in such a low place in society. Although they were generating wealth, they were treated as slaves and degraded.

Prostitution generated wealth for women, especially Chinese women, making the occupation enticing. Robert Reigel's article, *Changing American Attitudes toward prostitution*<sup>41</sup> uncovered the changes in American society from 1800 to 1920 that contributed to prostitution. Reigel exposed the past ideas that surrounded prostitution, and showed the profession in a new light. The reasons that women became prostitutes were varied and numerous, this was especially true during the California Gold Rush. Traditional historians of the Gold Rush were not reliable sources of the truth behind this profession until the feminist revolution took place in the 1960's. The topic of prostitution is as old as civilized life; however, its inclusion in written history had been limited. The connection of drugs, violence, and crime to prostitution were not issues favored in many studies of the Gold Rush. These issues, though, were at the root of prostitution for many of the women.

For many Chinese women, prostitution was their only means of generating a sizable income. In 1854, the first large group of Chinese prostitutes arrived in California. They came to port in San Francisco and made this their new home.<sup>42</sup> They went to live in the part of San

---

<sup>40</sup> Takaki 121.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Riegel, "Changing American Attitudes Toward Prostitution (1800-1920)." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29, no.3 (1968), 437-452.

<sup>42</sup> Benson Tong, *Unsubmissive Women* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 107.

San Francisco known as Chinatown. A few of the brothels were located outside the district and both white and Chinese women worked them. The men who frequented these brothels made the trip on their way in to work from home. Prostitution was widely accepted and promoted, especially among the Chinese women. Streetwalking, which was not traditionally part of prostitution, was not supported in the community and Chinese women kept their work inside the brothels.

Prostitution in American history was considered shameful and scandalous. Most historians' accounts of women in the west examined them in the context of prostitutes. Women of the night were common in the mining cities all over California. Although their work was less than reputable, it was prosperous. Even though this profession was widely recognized, it was rarely included in the history of the region. This inclusion or exclusion was not only limited to western history. Because of the social and moral values surrounding the topic it was often seen as very taboo.

Women's roles in the seedy under life of the small western gold towns were prevalent all through the region. These jobs were prosperous and gave the women sexual power, to a limited extent. The study of women in this light was not flattering, but to uncover the perception of these women was a powerful historical tool. The women who were fated to this lifestyle did so with little choice. The pressures that befell the women in this lifestyle were actually much deeper than was historically credited to these women. It was much greater than sexual desires and immoral actions and finally during the 1960's, the female condition was more closely examined.

As the women's movement in America took effect during the 1960's, the history of women in the American West began to evolve and change. The inclusion of women in the California Gold Rush was important. The women, although small in number made a large

impact on the history of this region. Women were there along side their male counterparts. Their importance is undeniable as more of their history is discovered and told. As the scholarship on this topic increases and more is uncovered about the women who impacted the west, their story will be told. Women's placement in western history is important to examine: women were replanted into a culture that gave them more freedom and financial opportunity, than they had previously known. In many cases women were included into the male sphere. Western women became radically different from eastern women. Understanding women in the California Gold Rush and their presence in the west opens up the history of the entire event and provides a better history.

Women and men alike were part of the gold rush. Just as there was much conflict among the different races, so was there conflict about the presence and role of women in this time period. In a time when women were a second class citizen, seen as subservient to their husbands, women broke with tradition and took on roles that are shocking and surprising. Women in this time also faced discrimination. The role of women in Western history is not completely understood, and their true importance has not yet been fully explored.

As women they were viewed as secondary citizens and their roles were often minimized. For the few Anglo and non-Anglo women who found success in the quest for gold, they were often penalized and even with success they came to know hardship at the hands of the Anglo-American men and the California government. Women of color, like Euro-American women, were faced with consequences of over stepping the boundaries imposed on them by Anglo laws and social ideals. Women were very important in changing the society and culture of the gold rush era. These women though were not all white and of European descent, as was commonly perceived. Women of color, alongside Anglo women, were forced to break their traditional roles and create a new role for

themselves. These new roles as the cultural seeds that they passed down became part of the culture and tradition of the mining towns and camps.

The hardships that women faced due to their sex were unbelievable. Women were seen as the weaker and less capable gender in this time in Western history. As for today's perception women through feminist history are given the credit and acknowledgment that they so deserve. Women, along with men braved the unknown and traveled great distances to create the American dream for themselves. Women worked along side their husbands or on their own and made a considerable contribution to the family's ability to survive. In some cases, when the family relied upon the women for money, it was the women who were the true heroes in the California Gold Rush. Women used what talents and abilities they had in order to make a living and even profit from the gold in the mining camps and towns. Men with pockets of money became a good source of income for women and these women with little prior knowledge of business used this to make money and succeed.

Ultimately the "Cult of Domesticity" prevailed over the "freedom" of the West. Although women achieved prosperity and greater independence in California they never fully abandoned their traditional roles. The breakdown of some traditions in the Anglo families, along with the changing culture of non-Anglo women lead to the creation of a unique society. Life for Anglo women was drastically different; the changes in the culture "out west" were very beneficial for most of these women. The ideology of the "Cult of Domesticity" was a burden and even though in California they were no longer obliged to follow, shedding their past heritage and ideas ingrained into their identities was difficult. Non-Anglo women had similar experiences in the gold rush and living in the West, but for many it was a time of hardship. The breakdown of tradition for the Chinese women was devastating. Their rigid class system was



diminished in California. Mexican women too were challenged. The new comers to the region directly challenged their way of life. The mass intrusion into California changed the culture of the Mexican women. Anglo values were looked upon as correct and many Mexican women felt the need to try and mold their values with the new culture. This was true for the Native American Women that inhabited this region as well. They were encouraged to adapt to this new culture, and the changes in their culture did not support their traditional ways of life. The new culture that was created in California was beneficial in many ways and in some ways it was destructive.

## Bibliography:

- Armitage, Susan, "Men and Women in Western History: A Stereotypical Vision." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1985): 381-395.
- Cleland, Robert Glass, ed., *Apron full of Gold*. Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1949.
- Faragher, John Mack, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1979.
- Gonzales, Manuel. *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Jameson, Elizabeth. "Toward a Multicultural History of Women in the Western United States," *Signs* 13, no.4 (1988): 766.
- Levy, Jo Ann. *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1990.
- Ling, Huping. *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Peavy, Linda and Smith, Ursula, *Gold Rush Widows of Little Falls*. St Paul: Minnesota Historical Press, 1990.
- Riegel, Robert, "Changing American Attitudes Toward Prostitution (1800-1920)." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29, no.3 (1968): 437-452.
- Riley, Glenda, "Feminizing the History of the Gold Rush." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1999): 445-448.
- Royce, Sarah. *A Frontier Lady*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977.
- Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*. New York: Penguin Group, 1989.
- Taniguchi, Nancy J. *Weaving a Different World*. Edited by Kevin Starr, and Richard Orsi. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000.
- Tong, Benson. *Unsubmissive Women*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.
- Wheat, Carl I., *The Shirley Letters; from the California Mines 1851-1852*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1961.