

what, why, and why me (all questions that also deserve to be treated in fiction), Caldwell's exploration of the question "how" is a valid one. Her answer is summed up by Shelly who discovers that the secret of her ancestors' strength is "their will. They chose to love when they could have hated. How very simple. How very hard" (p. 162). This answer is also a valid one. It has the kind of luminous simplicity that can strike one as either transcendent or as simple-minded.

Almost the novel persuades me that it is transcendent, but I draw back because of what seems an irredeemable flaw in the structure of the novel itself. The frame story simply does not work. Not only is it trite beyond belief—even though true—to have a descendant read through an ancestor's diary and come away fortified, inspired, and strengthened, but the rest of Shelly's life becomes simplicity itself after her experience with the journals.

She rejects the idea of an abortion. Her husband divorces her and gets custody of their three sons. Her handicapped daughter is born, she turns the family home into a private institution for handicapped children, her daughter dies, a professor she has met three paragraphs earlier marries her, and they have a normal but rebellious daughter named Caroline who is, as the novel closes, reading through her great-grandmother's diary.

All of this slick tidiness in five pages rather offensively reminds me of the closing verses of the book of Job where somehow getting double of everything, including children, is supposed to make us feel that we have experienced a happy ending; or even that happy endings are what it's all about. Despite my misgivings about Carlie, her discoveries were not of happy endings but of a way of coping with the ragged, jagged pieces of living. Caldwell should have quit while she was ahead.

"Strange Fever:" Women West

Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1890 edited and compiled by Kenneth L. Holmes, Vol. 1 (Glendale, Calif.: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 272 pp., \$25; Vol. 2, 1983, 294 pp., \$25.

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"THIS PAST WINTER there has been a strange fever raging here . . . It seems to be contagious and it is raging terribly, nothing seems to stop it but to tear up and take a six months trip across the plains with ox teams to the Pacific Ocean" (p. 209). Keturah Belknap, the twenty-eight-year-old devout Methodist who made this entry in her "memorandum" early in the spring of 1847, caught the "strange fever" herself and shortly thereafter headed

west. She and her family eventually settled in eastern Oregon. Her chronicle of that journey, a classic in its attention to the details of preparation, is one of several engrossing commentaries in this first book of a ten-volume compilation of diaries and letters of pioneer women.

The first volume, covering 1840-49, includes the contributions of thirteen women. Kenneth Holmes, the editor, has framed each section with a prologue and epilogue to establish each woman in her personal context. As Holmes suggests, these contexts are as important as the journals themselves.

The original criterion for inclusion in the series was that the journal not be readily available being either unpublished or published in very limited editions. However, the letters of Tamsen Donner and Virginia Reed of the Donner party have been included here apparently because they have never been published precisely as

written. Holmes stresses that "the manner of writing, including spelling, punctuation, and capitalization or lack of it, is an important statement by the writer. It tells something important about her and about the society in which she lived and moved and had her being" (p. 16).

There was no "average" pioneer woman. They came in all ages and from a variety of situations, although most were, or had been, married. Of the thirteen women, seven went to Oregon (the editor is professor emeritus at Western Oregon State College), five to California, and one, Patty Sessions, to Utah. Most appeared to enjoy the experience, in spite of hardships, and to be happy with their new homes. Betsey Bayley, who crossed the plains from Missouri to Oregon in 1845, notes, "I saw a great many curiosities on the journey, the buffalo and hot spring where water boiled up hot enough to scald hogs, the natural clay houses, a great many Indians of different tribes" (p. 36). And at the conclusion of her journey, she writes optimistically, "We live in a very pleasant part of the country, and are now doing better than at any time during our lives. I hope [to] have a long life of happiness under the 'vine and fig tree' of my own planting for happiness consists in a contented mind" (p. 38).

The prose found in this collection ranges from the long and lyrical to the brief and practical. Sallie Hester, a fourteen-year-old on her way to California in 1849, writes, "There are several encampments in sight, making one feel not quite out of civilization. So many thousands all en route for the land of gold and Italian skies" (p. 238). Even Patty Sessions, that practical Mormon midwife, notes beauty in her clipped shorthand style: "Drove our cattle all together into the river to drink it was a pretty sight" (p. 167). More down to earth is Anna Maria King who lists prices of commodities such as calico costing from ten to fifty cents. Keturah Belknap gives us a method for making bread on the trail (p. 195) and Elizabeth Dixon Smith

demonstrates a prevailing concern with fuel: "We see thousands of buffalow and have to use their dung for fuel a man will gather a bushel in a minute 3 bushels makes a good fire" (p. 121).

There are frequent touches of humor, occasionally malice-laced. When Tabitha Brown, a widow of sixty-six, arrives in Oregon on Christmas day, she stops at the home of a Methodist minister who quickly suggests that she "take the whole charge of his house and family through the winter" because, Tabitha observes caustically, "his wife was as ignorant and useless as a Heathen Goddess" (p. 58). Keturah Belknap writes down the enormous menu she is preparing for Christmas and notes afterwards, "Everything went off in good style. Some one heard the old folks say they had no idea Kit could do so well" (p. 203).

As might be expected, the suffering inherent in traveling overland is a common theme. Tabitha Brown and Anna Maria King were both in companies which took the misnamed "shortcuts," resulting in profound hardship. In King's company more than fifty died in the two months they spent traveling the shorter road. Brown writes that "we had sixty miles desert without grass or water" (p. 52). And Elizabeth Smith sums up one especially trying period, "I have not told half we suffered. I am inadequate to the task" (p. 143). Tamsen Donner's early letters are sadly ironic: "I never could have believed we could have traveled so far with so little difficulty" (p. 71). At the same time, the letter presages future difficulties, "Our preparation for the journey, in some respects, might have been bettered. . . . I fear bread will be scarce" (p. 70). She died during the catastrophe in the Sierras. Virginia Reed, however, survived. She was the fourteen-year-old stepdaughter of James Reed. Writing to her cousin from Napa Valley, she says, "I have wrote you anuf to let you now that you dont now what truble is but thank the Good god we have only got throw and the onely family that did

not eat human flesh." Then, with an amazing, youthful resilience, she concludes, "Dont let this letter dishaten anybody and never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can" (p. 80).

Of particular interest to Latter-day Saint readers is the journal of Patty Bartlett Sessions's 1847 overland journey. This portion of her journal is an excellent addition to the growing bibliography on Sessions, a midwife who joined the Church in 1833 and reportedly delivered 4,000 babies in Kirtland, Nauvoo, Winter Quarters, Salt Lake Valley, and intervening points. This portion of her diary reflects her devotion to the Church, as well as the rigors of the trail. Her journal also discloses the Mormon pioneers' strong organizational structure, an advantage seldom possessed by the less cohesive groups crossing the plains. She refers to the companies of 100s, 50s, and 10s into which each group was divided, as well as to helpful trail markers left by the original "Pioneers" led by Brigham Young: "Go 15 miles camp where the Pioneers did found another guide board it said they had killed 11 buffaloe the 2 of May" (p. 169). A few days later she writes, "10 oclock I meet with the little girls in my waggon have a good time the Lord is pouring his spirit out on the youth they spoke in tounge and rejoiced in God my heart was glad" (p. 172).

Sessions's section of *Covered Wagon Women* is the only one for which Holmes has appended a biographical list of the people mentioned in the diary itself. He also includes a selected bibliography on "early Mormon experience, especially that of women." (No bibliography or analytical index for the series as a whole will be published until the last volume.) Pioneer Mormons are seldom mentioned by the other diarists in this volume. One of the rare notices is from Phoebe Stanton who observes in 1847 that "we are asked a gret many times if we are Mormons when we tell them no they say I know you are but you wont own it your wagons looks like it and will say I hope you are not for their

road is marked with stolen property and all maner of wickedness" (p. 87).

Another volume of this series, published late in 1983, chronicles the journeys of six women who crossed the plains in 1850. One accompanied an army train to Santa Fe; three followed the gold rush to California; one each traveled to Utah and Oregon. Although the common search for fuel, water, and pasture run through both volumes, two problems were unique to 1850. Most travelers that year were men headed for the gold fields of California. Margaret Frink, who accompanied her husband to Sacramento, wrote in her literate account, "The emigrants are a woe-begone, sorry-looking crowd. The men, with long hair and matted beards, in soiled and ragged clothes, covered with alkali dust, have a half-savage appearance. There are but few women; among those thousands of men, we have not seen more than ten or twelve" (p. 143).

The second problem was a long cholera epidemic. Each woman mentions the number of recent graves on the trail, as well as deaths in their individual companies. Sarah Davis says a friend "was no better and I soon saw she would die and she did die before noon o how lonely I felt to think I was all the woman in company and too small babes left in my care it seems to me as if I would be hapy if I only had one woman with me" (p. 179).

The only Mormon in this volume is Sophia Lois Goodridge who traveled with her parents, five sisters, and a brother from Lunenburg, Massachusetts. As with Patty Sessions's journal in the first volume, her account includes a cast of characters and a selected bibliography.

Apparently, non-Mormons crossing the plains began using the Mormon organizational structure. Lucena Parsons writes, "Last evening Mr. Hyde from Kanessville came down & organized us in a company of 50 under the command of Captain Foote" (p. 239). Parsons and company later had some negative experiences with the Saints in Utah, for "we began to learn some thing of the Mormons and thought