Abstract

The female role has become more and more prominent over the course of history. This paper focuses on the role of women on the prairie during the mid- to late 1800s as settlement began on the Great Plains. While the role of women was very important in the pioneer world, the burden and the harshness of the prairie was too often more than some women could bare. Prairie Madness, or Prairie Fever, was a mental illness that swept the Plains and affected hundreds of pioneers in various ways. Some fell ill at the loss of children, for others it was the loss of their identity due to the new roles they were subjected to. These new roles involved helping with the men’s work around the homestead in addition to their own womanly and motherly chores.

This essay explains what life was like for women on the prairie, some causes of insanity, and then how their lives were after they fell ill. More specifically, it examines life in insane asylums on the prairie. The main goal of this paper is to emphasize the role of women during this time as well as explain and explore how difficult it was to uphold this role as “home maker, wife, and mother.” It includes several accounts and examples from real journals and diaries of women who lived through it.

Women on the Prairie

When the words “Homesteader” or “Pioneer” are heard, the first images that come to mind are men – heading west early to start a home for their family to come to later, plowing fields, driving cattle, scattering across the western United States to harvest pelts and civilize the Native Americans. They led the military as well as served it to tame the wilds of the new country. They cleared the land and even attempted to settle it in hopes of it becoming something safe for their families. They faced many hardships as individuals but were not prepared for the
struggles that would face them and their families, particularly their wives, on the merciless prairie.

In 1862, after the Homestead Act passed and as women began to arrive on the Great Plains, they were expected to do both the work of men as well as the household chores typically associated with “women’s work” (Webb, 1931). While raising children, mending clothing, cooking, and tending the garden women of the prairie were also expected to help plow the fields, tend animals, and do additional farm work when necessary. Women were seen as homesteaders, fighters, and equals to men across the Great Plains during its settlement (Webb, 1931).

While considered equal to men, the emotional, mental, and physical toll women faced was much more extreme than most men witnessed. From a physical standpoint, most women had a smaller build and did not have quite the physical abilities that men had. Women also tended to be more emotional than men and were mentally affected by difficulties such as child birth, loss of a child or sometimes children, and even the wind that almost never ceased to howl across the prairie. These factors, along with various others, essentially drove women to insanity. The women who were affected the worst entered a deep state of depression and were either shipped off to an insane asylum, which were slowly following hospitals on their expansion across the Plains, or were returned to relatives back east to be cared for in a familiar place. Those who did not leave the Plains eventually succumbed to their illness.

Life on the Plains

Life on the Great Plains has always proven to be more difficult than life in more urban areas. This was especially true in the mid-1800s as thousands of pioneers began to flood the Plains, searching for a better life and new opportunities. The Homestead Act, signed by President
Lincoln on May 20, 1862, promoted life on the frontier by allotting homesteaders 160 acres of land. The land was incredibly cheap. All the homesteaders had to do was pay a filing fee and then live on the land for a full five years, making improvements as they went (Lee, 1979). While the vast majority of the settlers who flooded into the region were male, there was no law stating that women could not take advantage of the Homestead Act. Married women, however, could not obtain land in their name, it had to be in their husbands. But, women who were widowed, single, deserted, or divorced could obtain land in their own name (Lindgren, 2011). Women of all ethnicities took advantage of this deal, and many were able to make it work.

Pioneer men and women have also proven to be tough individuals who were not scared of challenges and did not often back down when faced with hard times. One example of a pioneer family doing what they had to do while facing hardships is the story of Luna and J.T. Kellie. Living on the prairie in a house made out of sod, they had little resources to protect themselves and their animals from the blizzard that was coming. In the rage of the storm, they brought 14 head of steers into their sod house to spend the night with them and their children. The Kellie’s had three children, but also lost two babies from the stress on the Plains. Due to being overworked, stressed, and the lack of food in the winter time, Luna actually ran out of milk to nurse her babies (Lindgren, 2011). Another example is Abigail Scott Duniway’s story of her hardships on the journey west on the wagon train as well as her hardships as a women. She first writes of her mother telling her that “her sorrow over my sex was almost too great to be borne.” And again, when Abigail’s sister was born, “Poor baby, she’ll be a woman someday, poor baby, a woman’s life is so hard” (Schlissel, 1977).

It is not that men did not face trials, hard times, or simply had it easier. Both men and women faced dirt, intense heat, extreme cold, flies, lack of water, fear of Indians, loss of
livestock, and diseases that were common on the journey as well as during settlement. On top of all of these fears and struggles, however, women also faced the trial that is childbirth, which in some cases claimed the life of the baby as well as the mother. Women were also the caretakers of the sick, wounded, or dying and were also expected to care for crying children and babies (Schlissel, 1977). Women kept vivid and detailed diaries, describing daily life both on the wagon train and their life in sod houses. A lot of what they recorded was the physical and mental stress that they, or others, faced along the journey. One journal entry read, “Mrs. George Belshaw give birth to a daughter 4 o’clock this morning. Lived about 2 weeks” (Schlissel, 1977). Women kept lists of the death toll that took place along the journey as well as the number of graves they passed that day. They would also note in their journals the number of dead animals they passed. To have passed enough dead animals to keep a tally is significant. Faced with inevitable death as they crossed the Plains, the task of keeping in good spirits and remaining hopeful for the future was not easy. Another journal entry by Lodisa Frizzell reads, “the heart has a thousand misgivings, and the mind is tortured with anxiety, and often as I passed the fresh-made graves, I have glanced at the side boards of the wagons, not knowing how soon it would serve as a coffin for some one of us” (Schlissel, 1977).

Once settled, there was still the fear of death, but it was more the wildness of the land that pioneer women feared. When a man decided to farm a section that was isolated from other sections the husband would hunt and the wife would forage to provide food for their families. Miriam Davis in Kansas, tied her children to the legs of a table as she went out to forage because she was so scared that one or more of her children would be bitten by a rattlesnake if unsupervised and free to explore (Schlissel, 1977).
Causes of Insanity

Since the pioneers settled on the prairie during the mid-late 1800s, there have been stories based on Prairie Madness or “Mad Pioneer Women.” Prairie Madness also known as Prairie Fever was essentially a disease that affected European settlers as they moved from urban areas to the spacious, untamed prairie. Prairie Madness resulted in mental breakdowns brought on by the extremely harsh living conditions people were faced with as well as the isolation they faced. Most settlers having come from highly populated European cities, were in shock by the vast openness they found themselves in arriving on the prairie. In extreme cases on Prairie Madness, women were found to commit suicide, murder their children, become depressed, become bedridden, were sometimes locked in rooms or attics, and many either died or were sent away to asylums where they later died (Johnson, 2011). It is difficult to find individual stories of women who suffered from insanity because when a woman fell ill, it was kept a secret due to the fact that insanity or depression were both considered shameful. By 1880, most people who were considered insane had been admitted to an asylum (Johnson, 2011).

Men’s Work

The journey west itself, was enough to drive even the strongest people insane. One of the hardest things for women to do was to participate in physically exhausting tasks that had previously only been referred to as “men’s work” (Schlissel, 1977). What resulted from this was women having trouble with identification, things like class orientation, gender role, and even self-evaluation. Many diaries and journals recorded women wanting to maintain their domestic manor as a wife and mother, and less of a hired hand. Along with the work being strenuous it was also thought of as demeaning. It would be equivalent to middle-class work today. While
women participated in men’s work, there is no documentation of men doing the same when it came to the home making side of things.

Westward expansion would have been impossible without women, and through literature of the time they receive very little recognition. They were not viewed as the romanticized actors of the prairie such as the cowboys, the fur traders, the mountain men, etc. and therefore they were ignored (Walsh, 1995). Those women who did stand out as exceptional were however, labeled as “unworthy of the name woman” or were considered to have easy virtues (Walsh, 1995).

Isolation

Another factor of the journey that affected women in particular, more-so then men, was the breaking of long lived relationships when they moved from their already settled homes to the prairie. In already established communities in the eastern United States, women had built many relationships over the course of their lives, and leaving that support system behind really took its toll. This dislocation from their home based relationships is thought to be the origin of most of the tribulation these women faced (Schlissel, 1977).

To reduce the discomfort that isolation brought to women of the Great Plains, women wrote letters to either friends or loved ones back home. Having a letter arrive broke the silence and gave the women joy and hope to hear news that did not pertain to their daily lives on the prairie such as weddings, stories of family, births and deaths, as well as prosperity and illness (Schlissel, 1977). When a letter arrived it was such an important event that it was even included in their journals. It was also included in the journal when a family member had not written in a while. Letter writing helped to remove women from the men and children for a short time. It
allowed them their privacy as well as helping to rebuild the social structure and relationships they had left behind on the journey west.

Death

The delicacy of life was a hardship that many pioneer women were not prepared for, but quickly became accustomed to as disease, illness, wounds, and stress over took family members and neighbors on the prairie. Because of their roles as caretakers and nurses, women were close to death throughout their journeys and lives on the prairie. It was commonplace for women on the prairie, and those crossing it on wagons, to keep diaries and journals of the trek. Some women began keeping track of the death toll as well as the numbers of graves they passed in a day, sometimes totaling up to 30 graves in the 20 or so miles they made that day. Sometimes they would add the additional note of what dead animals, such as oxen or cows, they passed as well. It was not uncommon for an entry to read, “Child’s grave…smallpox…child’s grave…passed seven new-made graves. One had four bodies in it…cholera. A man died this morning with the cholera in the company ahead of us…another man died…passed six new graves” (Schlissel, 1977). Signs of death and despair were all around them, and still they managed to press on and remain hopeful of the new life they were heading for.

As in today’s world, the loss of a child or spouse is detrimental to family life. It causes grief that can set people off the edge, or push them to points they cannot return from. On the Great Plains, when a family member was lost, coupled with the isolation women were already facing, the load was difficult to bear.
Wind

“The caprice of the wind is evident everywhere on the prairie. The wind plants the seeds of grasses and forbs by its vagaries near the ground. It cleans the sand out of creek bottoms in summer and fills them with snow in winter. It cuts off seedling trees with sandblasts, stirs up wind devils on hot summer days, and breeds violent tornadoes that leave devastation in their paths” (Costello, 1969).

Today people on the Great Plains are protected by sturdy houses and windows that, for the most part, keep the wind at bay. We have planted shelter belts and constructed wind breaks to slow the merciless, howling gusts that have crossed the Plains for centuries. Miriam Davis, as mentioned earlier having the fear of her children being bitten by rattlesnakes, comes up again talking about wind. Her oven is so small she can only bake one loaf of bread at a time. The wind has blown so hard that she has had to place stones all the way around the oven, several times, to keep the coals underneath it (Schlissel, 1977).

Life after the Plains

The women who did not succumb to their illnesses on the Great Plains were relocated either back East to their families they had originally left for the prairie, or they were admitted to various insane asylums, which were becoming more frequent. Asylums began following hospitals to the Great Plains in the late 1800s (Johnson, 2011). By 1880, there were 140 institutions in America, seven of which were located in the Great Plains states. Some interesting statistics for Nebraska alone is that the state’s population was 452,402 in the year 1880. Of that total, 450 were considered to be insane, and nearly half of those declared insane were women (Johnson, 2011). The 1880 census indicated the amount of insane people in the United States
increased in numbers at the end of the nineteenth century. Right around 1880, most people who were considered to be insane had been placed into an asylum.

Issues followed asylums across the Plains, such as patient abuse. Facilities were often subpar, aged, and overcrowded. This resulted in less than adequate care given to patients. The life of a patient was often considered desolate and most patients lived out the remainder of their lives in the institution. Their lives in turn were relatively short after being admitted.

Women were brought to these institutions for the mentally ill due to the general causes of insanity inflicted by life on the prairie as listed above. These symptoms include loss of a family member(s), poverty, anxiety, history of mental illness, substance abuse, and physical or emotional abuse. Some other less common symptoms included melancholia, intemperance, paralysis, mania, and dementia (Johnson, 2011). In today’s research, cultural change or shock is considered to be a large factor when it comes to mental illness. Homesteaders and pioneers experienced the largest cultural change relocating from populated, urban areas to the desolate, wild, and open country of the Great Plains.

**Women on the Prairie, Concluded**

The importance of women on the Great Plains during the late 1800s is a topic that has received minimal attention. Within this paper, the importance of women on the prairie has been examined as well as the difficulties and afflictions they faced serving these crucial roles. Life on the Plains was harsh and death, physical exhaustion, lack of social structure and support, as well as the hard times brought on by the unpredictable climate of the area did not make living there any easier. It took exceptionally tough people, both physically and mentally, to make a life in this region. This essay proves that and also shows that not all those who started finished.
Prairie Madness and mental illness on the Plains is an issue that deserves as much attention as health concerns today receive. It is also important to express the lack of care those who suffered received and the uncomfortable and unfortunate situations they were subject to during a dark part of their life. Not everyone who settled in this region faced such misfortune as the examples provided in this essay, but all who lived here witnessed trials that they had to overcome.

**Literature Cited**


