

Petticoats to Trousers:
True Womanhood and California Gold Rush Women

By Sarah Rossos

June 2, 2005
HST 499

What is true womanhood and manhood? There is much history based on what women and men do and why they do it. Anglo American women had ideals as to what true womanhood meant in society. Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood," published in 1966, has laid a foundation for the discussion and interpretation of female roles in American society. Through examination of women's magazines and books during 1820-1860, she has come up with four areas a woman must follow in order to be regarded as a true woman. These four prescriptions are piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. Not only did Anglo women follow these prescriptions, but other ethnicities felt that to be part of the American society they must acquire the defined social roles of America. Native American, Chinese, and Mexican men and women realized in the nineteenth century the need to adopt the image that the Americans called "true womanhood and manhood." Welter and other historians have discovered that during the mid-nineteenth century, women began to form new roles as they adapted to their new surroundings on the western frontier. The California gold rush is one event that demonstrates the alteration of true womanhood. The pioneers of California were faced with many new experiences. The lives they led and the social constraints they had in the East no longer were as much of a concern on the frontier. Before, men and women were always altering their roles to conform with what society deemed as "right," now they were conforming to what their environment made available. Today there is a change in what is viewed as the ideal man and woman. If someone does not follow these prescriptions, there is a degree of disappointment that is often held by onlookers. By looking at the California gold rush, one can view the degree to which true womanhood

was abandoned, altered, or maintained. Women's altered roles of true womanhood can be more clearly seen by focusing on women's homes, dress, and jobs.

Women were told how to act by different books and magazines such as *The Lady's Gift: Souvenir for All Seasons*¹ and "Ladies Companion." The "Ladies Companion" was a monthly magazine which spoke of literature and music; it would have been very influential in shaping how women were meant to behave.²

Some historians, such as Barbara Welter, explain true womanhood as having quite defined parameters, while other historians believe that there may not be sharp lines that determine if a woman is acting against or with true womanhood. This is brought up by some historians who have revealed the differences of true womanhood throughout different cultures such as Native American, Chinese, and Mexican. All of these women shared the same experiences as many white women during the western expansion and specifically the gold rush, yet they all were treated quite differently. Mexican, Chinese, and Native American women had their own ideas of womanhood that were brought with them from their own cultures. Native American women were able to carry great power within their culture and were the providers of at least half of their tribe's food. These customs were very different than those of the American women who were supposed to submit to their husbands and take no part in political activities. This desire for political involvement is evidenced by the number of women who supported groups for women's suffrage. Chinese women were even more constrained than Anglo American women. They were expected to be completely submissive, even to their sons.³ By studying these cultures, historians can interpret the differences of true womanhood and how these

¹ Welter, 152

² Welter, 153

³ Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 18.

differences affected the community as a whole. This historical analysis will specifically examine the California gold rush culture so as to understand in more detail how women were treated and what they were expected to do under the guidelines of true womanhood.

Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," written in 1966 discusses many of the social roles that women were supposed to follow. These roles were defined by the women's publications of that time which required women to be respectable and moral, constantly bringing life and morality to their families. A woman was, "judged by her husband, her neighbors and society.....," in four categories, "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."⁴ Men were supposed to seek women out who first and foremost were displaying piety in their lives. Religion was to be carried by women, who it was believed in their very nature were able to uphold religious values more completely than men. Women were also to be almost entirely confined to the home, which was to be their place on earth.⁵ Purity was considered as important as religion. Welter explains that a woman who had given away her innocence or fallen into temptation of that nature was considered a "fallen angel."⁶ By withstanding the advances of men, a woman showed her strength and dominion over him.⁷ Submission was also very important. From the "Ladies Companion," a monthly women's magazine, Welter quotes a young woman saying that a woman should not, "feel and act for herself."⁸ A woman, according to these beliefs, needed a man to look out for her and to be concerned for her welfare. One physician even stated that women were incapable of thinking for themselves, saying, "Woman has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough

⁴ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 152.

⁵ Welter, 153

⁶ Welter, 154

⁷ Welter, 156

⁸ Welter, 159

for love.”⁹ The role of women’s work was to be quiet and unnoticed, not giving advice until a man asked for it.¹⁰ It was the job of women in all circumstances to help men find God and to keep men from wanting the evils of the world.¹¹

Mary Louise Roberts discusses the conflict over true womanhood in her article, “True Womanhood Revisited,” written in 2002.¹² Roberts suggests that while true womanhood existed, she believes that Barbara Welter exaggerated its extent. Roberts examines the true meaning and existence of true womanhood. She makes one consider how many women followed the ideals of true womanhood. Were these practices followed without question by the majority of women? Upon closer examination, Roberts finds Welter’s article to be sprinkled with sarcasm. She suggests that Welter’s excessive use of sarcasm is her attempt to make up for the lack of strong evidence. One must then question the Cult of True Womanhood that Welter put forth.

Mary Kelley in her “Beyond the Boundaries,” article discusses Barbara Welter’s argument of the Cult of True Womanhood and explains the conflicting information she found.¹³ Kelley explains that the roles that Welter claims as inhibiting women are viewed by other historians as empowering.¹⁴ Women used their roles such as piety to enforce certain ideas such as abolition.¹⁵ Women were to be viewed as pure, and they found the purity as a defense against men and any inappropriate sexual advances. She centers much of the discussion on the fact that women’s roles cannot be as simplified as Welter explained them to be. Many women were not as unhappy as Welter claimed, and

⁹ Welter, 160

¹⁰ Welter, 161

¹¹ Welter, 163

¹² Mary Louise Roberts, “True Womanhood Revisited,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14 (2002): 150.

¹³ Mary Kelley, “Beyond the Boundaries,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 21 (2001): 75.

¹⁴ Kelley, 74.

¹⁵ Kelley, 75.

many used the Cult of True Womanhood to help them accomplish their ideals. This idea that women were not inhibited and used their social roles for their own good is a useful tool in the explanation of true womanhood in California.

E. Anthony Rotundo wrote *American Manhood: Transformation in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, in 1993 and explains the gender roles and images that were associated with men from before the American Revolution to after the Civil War. Rotundo explains how men during this era were to be the heads of the household leading both in spiritual authority and wisdom. Women at this time were not thought to be as mentally capable as men by society. As the United States became a nation, many of the founding ideas and principles were labeled with the idea of manliness, which was equated with strength and courage. Men started to see that women were partners and therefore able to control some of the problems in the household, but only day-to-day troubles. Women were thought by society to be more pious than men, and therefore were able to take on the responsibility of teaching their young sons in the way of life. Men competed with women as they tried to strip virtue from society while women were trying to restore it.¹⁶ Rotundo is very descriptive about the roles that women had in shaping their sons into men. Another aspect that Rotundo explains is how the idea of men's hierarchy slowly diminished as men sought out their own ideas and careers for life.¹⁷ Fathers were to be the head of the household, their work supporting their families.¹⁸ This aspect was not always held to during the time of the gold rush where many of the women ran the businesses.

¹⁶ E. Anthony Rotundo, "Community to Individual: The Transformation of Manhood at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," in *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 23.

¹⁷ Rotundo, 10-30.

¹⁸ Rotundo, 26.

Theda Perdue wrote *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change: 1700-1835*. This work explains the importance of Cherokee women in the past. This is unique in that past historical works focused on whole tribes, most often from information given by the men of the tribe. Native men were not privy to many of the activities and daily routines of women, and European historians, who were mostly men, were also not allowed into the native women's lives.¹⁹

Theda Perdue also wrote the article, "Domesticating the Natives: Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood," in 1990 which explains how the Cherokee people tried to conform to the ideas of true womanhood and true manhood pressed upon them by the Protestant missionaries so that they might fit in with American society. Native American men and women were to be more like the Anglo Americans who were more "civilized." This article enables historians to get a clearer picture of Native American ideas and experiences of true womanhood. In order to survive, they tried to conform to the ideas of the white Europeans. In order for this change to take place, the Cherokee needed to make a complete turnaround in gender roles. Women had traditionally been farmers as well as responsible for the children and control of both the house and the land. During the mid-nineteenth century they were expected to stay in the home preparing food, sewing, and weaving. Men, who were used to their traditions of hunting and warfare, were now expected to start farming, become the leader of the house,

¹⁹ Theda Perdue, *Cherokee women: gender and culture change, 1700-1835*, (Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 4.

and only take one wife. This was the complete opposite of the traditional gendered roles among the Cherokee people.²⁰

With the fact that many Cherokee women were never recognized and their history not recorded, Perdue found it important to discover and reveal who Cherokee women were.²¹ Most of this type of history is based on the new history that has formed which is beginning to re-examine racial and gender discrimination throughout history. What once had been a culture where women had an influence in the political structure and a high position, transitioned into a society that stripped them of their rights and land and confined them to household work. This is an important example in understanding how other cultures dealt with the Anglo American idea of true womanhood. These Cherokee women viewed women's roles very differently than Anglo Americans. As Anglo Americans began to influence and demand conformity of the Native Americans, many Cherokee women struggled with the new view of what women were supposed to do. Unfortunately, as hard as the Cherokee tried to become "true women" in the new American culture, their skin color and ancestry would keep them from being socially equal with those they sought to emulate.

Many examples of true womanhood can be found by exploring the expansion of the western frontier. The western frontier can serve as a broad case study of how women in the West were experiencing and challenging the prescriptions of true womanhood. This history is especially rich with information because it was during a time when many women were put into situations where it was not easy to act the way they were

²⁰ Theda Perdue, "Domesticating the Natives: Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood," in *Women, Families and Communities*, Vol. 1: To 1877, Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1990) pp. 159-169

²¹ Perdue, 5.

accustomed to act in the East. Many of these women lived in homes with little more than dirt and a few boards for floors and siding. Women learned how to cook food with very few utensils and some even without stoves, using only Dutch ovens that they set over an open fire. Using the western frontier as a case study of true womanhood also enables historians to look at many different cultures and areas of the United States. For Eastern women moving west in the mid-nineteenth century, areas such as Alaska were quite different than the areas of Texas. Not only did the housing differ from region to region, but what women were expected to do varied as well. Many women who came to Oregon in the mid-nineteenth century were expected to help build the homestead and cultivate crops with their husbands, while in California mining towns, many of the women opened boarding houses or became laundresses to help with the income that their husbands were not making.²² Mexican women also moved to the United States with their husbands, bringing new ideas of true womanhood. Chinese women were often brought over to America as slaves for prostitution which inhibited their ability to conform to true womanhood. Looking especially at Native American women, historians can see the large contrast of power that Native women held and Anglo American women could never hope to realize. All of these unique stories of the West include examples of how women tried to keep many of their social customs of femininity, yet they also demonstrate the need to alter some of those customs in order to survive on the frontier.

Susan G. Butruille in *Women's Voices from the Western Frontier*, from 1995, discusses the topic of women on the frontier and their desire to still embrace the rules of true womanhood. She cites numerous accounts of women who traveled to the frontier and struggled to survive in the wild American West. Butruille compares the Cult of True

²² JoAnn Chartier and Chris Enss ed., *With Great Hope*, (Helena, MT: Falcon Publishing, 2000), 57.

Womanhood to the Cult of Individualism which described men and their desire for freedom and adventure. Women were meant to keep husbands civilized and well behaved when at the same time men were encouraged by society to search for freedom.²³ With men drinking and gambling their money away, women found it hard to find respect and keep a civilized home.²⁴

During the era of frontier life that Butruille discusses, women were fighting for equal pay, ownership of businesses, and the right to be guardians of their own children.²⁵ Women began using their feminine gatherings such as tea parties for planning women's rights events, altering the Cult of True Womanhood for their own purposes. During one instance, Susan B. Anthony made a women's rights speech at a quilting bee.²⁶ In many ways, women still tried to keep their ideas of domesticity and womanhood. They wanted change, but they still recognized their identity as women. Butruille makes readers examine the circumstances of women on the frontier and how true womanhood affected their lives.

Karen J. Blair's *Women in Pacific Northwest History*, written in 2001, discusses the idea of true womanhood differently than other historians. She explains how the idea of true womanhood has changed over time.²⁷ There are different ideas as to what "true womanhood" is, even in our own culture today. Blair's discussion makes one consider the changing ideas of true womanhood. True womanhood changed and differed between cultures. For example, many Native American women had prominent roles of power.

²³ Susan G. Butruille, *Women's Voices from the Western Frontier*, (Boise, ID: Tamarack Books, 1995), 236.

²⁴ Butruille, 234.

²⁵ Butruille, 230.

²⁶ Butruille, 221.

²⁷ Karen J. Blair ed., *Women in Pacific Northwest History*, (Seattle : University of Washington Press, 2001), 6.

Native American women controlled much of the food supplies, and their work was very much appreciated.²⁸ Each culture has a different meaning of true womanhood.

Elizabeth Jameson's, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," discusses the entire West and the different roles women played on the frontier. She explains that women were generally placed into two categories, good or bad.²⁹ Women were looked upon to be gentle, bringing civilization to the frontier that the men had recently conquered.³⁰ Jameson gives wonderful insight as to the accounts that many historians research when exploring the history of the West. Which women were able to write and keep their writings preserved? Are the accounts of true womanhood during the California gold rush from only a certain group of women present at the time? Women's history has very often been forgotten by historians as they recount events of the past. Thankfully, some women left behind excellent personal writings and memoirs.³¹ It is revealed by some of these western women that the idea of true womanhood could only be achieved by middle-class urban woman. Those women who were used to leisure lives were able to consume themselves with roles of true womanhood.³² One interesting fact that Jameson brings forth is the fact that women in history were not recognized unless they completed a male role during a crisis.³³ It is clear from Jameson's evidence, that women in the West did not treat true womanhood the same as women of the Eastern middle-class. Women were not recognized for their achievements and often times were meant to stay in the shadows, not showing their

²⁸ Blair ed., 8.

²⁹ Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers," in *The Women's West*, (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 145.

³⁰ Jameson, 146

³¹ Jameson, 148.

³² Jameson, 150.

³³ Jameson, 155.

presence. These all contribute to how true womanhood was altered and changed in the West. These examples are important evidence regarding the history of women within the California gold rush.

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, written in 2004 is an excellent source for women's history, focusing on many women of the West who stepped outside their confined world of domesticity. Women taking men's jobs such as buffalo soldiers, lawyers, and doctors are just a few examples of what took place on the frontier.³⁴ Joann Chartier, the author of *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, relays in her own description the experiences of these western women, extracted from many biographical newspaper articles and memoirs of these women. Besides recognizing remarkable women, this source also discussed the change that has taken place in women's history in recent decades. Even though there have been numerous advances in the study of women's history, Chartier explained how one museum had some male historians who discounted many of the feats that these heroic women achieved.³⁵ Today there are still gender and ethnic inequalities in the field of history.

In *Pacific Northwest Women*, from 1995, Jean M. Ward re-examines Fredrick Jackson Turner's idea of western expansion, which ignored women's presence on the frontier.³⁶ Besides explaining Turner's vision, Ward examines many examples of extraordinary women of the West. She uses works of other historians and many letters to interpret the history of these women. All of these women had unique experiences and many took on careers that had been only available to men. One woman, Bethenia Owens

³⁴ Joann Chartier and Chris Enss, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, (CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 2004), viii.

³⁵ Chartier, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, viii.

³⁶ Jean M. Ward and Elaine A. Maveety ed., *Pacific Northwest Women 1815-1925*, (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 1995), 2.

Adair, told of her struggle to become a doctor who brought great disappointment to her parents and son.³⁷ Many of these lives hold keys to what the West really was and how women were involved. Each of these women is an example of how true womanhood was viewed on the frontier. Many of these women's experiences provide insight as to how ideals of true womanhood changed over time.

Judy Yung in both her *Unbound Feet* and *Unbound Voices* explains the many situations that Chinese women faced in America. She describes the Chinese women and their terrible situations of prostitution. Many Chinese women were kidnapped and brought as slaves to America.³⁸ Some women were beaten until they "behaved" right.³⁹ Her examples are helpful in understanding Chinese women in California. Did these women try to follow customs of American true womanhood? Some women were not able to follow any ideas of the American true womanhood because they were indentured servants bound by their masters and enslaved in a lifestyle that was against every part of true womanhood.⁴⁰ Through these circumstances, one can still try to examine if these women tried to follow either their native or American ideas of true womanhood. Yung helps give insight as to Chinese women's social roles, lives, and acts of true womanhood.

By narrowing the study of True Womanhood to the events of the California gold rush, it is possible to focus on specific details and analyze the affect of true womanhood on these women. The California gold rush brought a multitude of people, mostly men, in search of fortunes. Few women traveled to these mines, yet those who did venture there are wonderful examples of how women adapted the ideals of true womanhood to the

³⁷ Ward ed., 81.

³⁸ Yung, *Unbound Voices*, 125

³⁹ Yung, *Unbound Voices*, 135

⁴⁰ Yung, *Unbound Feet*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 27

realities of the western frontier. In 1850 only 8 percent of the people living in California were women. The federal census in 1852 showed that the population nearly doubled to 15 percent, yet that still left one women for 5.7 men in California.⁴¹ Besides looking at these American women who migrated to California from the East, women from other cultures were part of the gold rush. Chinese, Mexican, and Native Americans all took part in the gold rush. Cultural traditions, racism, and economics all affected these women's experiences. By focusing on the California gold rush women it is easier to compare and contrast their lives since many lived through the same circumstances.

In "Duty, Adventure, and Opportunity: Women in the California Gold Rush," Malcom J. Rohrbough in 2000 illustrates how the women during the California Gold Rush were taking on different duties contrary to those of the ideal true woman. Women who were left behind in the East by their husbands had to begin running businesses alone and completely take over all the duties in the field and the house. Some husbands wanted their wives to accompany them, while other women shared the interest in the search for gold. Women who came to California experienced a different type of life than what they were accustomed to. Some women worked alongside their husbands and children in the gold fields. Other women stayed back in the mining cities and earned money by laundering clothes or by supplying comfortable lodging for other men. Rohrbough recounts one case of a woman who divorced her husband upon arriving in California and then proceeded to make money by baking pies for the miners. All of these women had to learn to sustain themselves while their husbands were in the gold fields. This article

⁴¹ California Gold Rush Stories: Becoming California, Don Baumgart, 2001 4/15/2005
<http://www.ncgold.com/History/BecomingCA_Archives5.html>

describes how the women had to change their idea of true womanhood in order to survive.⁴²

The gold rush was an adventure for men. It was considered by these same adventurous men to be too dangerous and expensive for women.⁴³ Women were supposed to take care of the house and children, not run off on an adventure to find gold. Some of the women did follow behind their husbands to California, many only out of obedience and the need to care for their families. However, some went for their own desire for adventure. The duties of women and men were often in conflict because men wanted to get rich for the family while the women wanted to keep their husbands safe and feared what might happen while they were gone.⁴⁴ Men often objected to their wives' desire to accompany them, not only because of the danger and expense, but reminded them that their duty was to take care of the children and house and continue their "domestic service." Eventually, this idea of keeping up their domestic services and raising the children changed, increased, or started to include additional labor as women began to do a greater variety of work in the absence of their husbands. There was confusion about some of the four tenets of true womanhood, purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness that a woman should follow. One instance involving a Miss Conway relays how she was praised during her trip to California in which it describes that even during the rugged adventure; she had kept the domestic skills image of true womanhood.⁴⁵

⁴² Malcolm J. Rohrbough, "Duty, Adventure, and Opportunity: Women and the California Gold Rush," *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* 4th edition, Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 149-156

⁴³ Rohrbough, 151.

⁴⁴ Rohrbough, 150

⁴⁵ Rohrbough, 151

The California gold rush was a turning point in how women behaved, but this behavior was a departure from the idea of true womanhood. Some women would come to California with their husbands and work alongside of them in the gold field, while others would take up jobs in the mining towns. Many men were in need of lodging, food, and laundry services.⁴⁶ These were tasks that were considered “women’s work.” Women began to start businesses in housework and lodging. This would sometimes bring in \$150.00 a month. Some women decided that instead of helping the men, they themselves would try to find their fortune in gold. Still other women began to create a business by providing a service that took advantage of the vices of men. Men would find women in taverns behind the bar and sitting at the gaming tables. Saloon girls were also at work. They would get the men to buy the drinks, get them drunk, and then take them upstairs to rob them of any money they had left.⁴⁷ One woman came to California already married, but along the way decided that she and her husband were not compatible and divorced.⁴⁸

All of these examples of experiences that women had after coming to the California area demonstrate a divergence from the way women were supposed to act according to society. Women were to be caretakers and to keep a good house. There were not supposed to be any women who were making more money than men in the area. These women altered true womanhood as they tried whatever they could to survive in the new land. Men did not need women who were beautifully adorned, raising multiple children, and keeping to their household. What had once been responsibilities, now turned into businesses. Most men disregarded the old view of true womanhood as long as

⁴⁶ Rohrbough, 152

⁴⁷ Rohrbough, 153

⁴⁸ Rohrbough, 155

the job got done. Piety was not a main concern for this area. Ministers told the wives of the men heading for gold country that it was not a Godly thing to let these men go.⁴⁹ Faith was not in the forefront of these people's minds. Domesticity was not something that the men needed or the women cared if they presented. Lodging and dinner was provided, and that was as domestic as a woman needed to be. A woman's success sometimes brought her disgrace in some men's eyes in that these men would never marry that type of woman. However, they appreciated all that she was able to provide.

Many of these women did not expect the situation that they would find themselves in upon reaching the California gold mines. The women who had stayed back East had many people to keep them company and help them in time of need, whereas, the women in gold country were few and far between and had to rely on themselves. Many of the towns were only tents which the men called home. When many of the women's husbands went off to the mines and then came back almost empty handed, either not finding gold or having spent it on the evils of the local tavern, women resorted to finding their own ways of making money. Some of these ideas of making money would not fall into the category of true womanhood that had been established in the East.

Many other cultures took part in this "golden" opportunity. Mexicans who recently had struggled over California with the United States took part in digging for the shiny rocks. Both men and women participated in the California mining towns. Native Americans began to take part as well. Some of the Native American and Mexican women were among the first to start the laundry economy at Washerwomen's Bay, in San Francisco. Chinese men and women also migrated to California in search of wealth. The United States had laws about Chinese marriages and even women coming over from

⁴⁹ Rohrbough, 150

China. Yung found this effect to be true through her examination of testimony from the California senate in 1876.⁵⁰

True womanhood has different meanings in different areas and different times. In California, women could be independent, make their own living, and have successful results without a male partner.⁵¹ Though many women kept the ideas of womanhood, many altered these ideas by commercializing their regular domestic roles. Many wives would cook meals for the miners who would in turn pay very handsomely. Soon, women were beginning to combine all these tasks together offering boarding houses where a man could get both lodging and a decent meal. Men were so starved for the pampering of women's work, that they would offer enormous amounts of money for tasks that women performed everyday.

There are examples of women who disguised themselves as men so that they had an equal opportunity to make a fortune in the gold fields. Diaries and letters written by California gold rush women present many ways of experiencing and challenging the prescriptions of true womanhood. By focusing on the homes that these women created and lived in, the attire that they wore, and the numerous jobs that they undertook to supply their families with money, the truth of womanhood can be revealed. The degree as to how much these women followed the idea of true womanhood can be separated into three other categories as well, abandonment, alteration, and maintenance.

⁵⁰ Yung, *Unbound Voices*, 125

⁵¹ Rohrbough, 149-156.



Figure 1 Woman bringing lunch to gold diggers in Auburn Ravine, CA, 1852 in Cathy Luchetti, *Women of the West*, (St. George, Utah: Antelope Island Press, 1982), 89.

When Anglo women reached the frontier of California, they found themselves amidst muddy cities of tents. Many realized that this would be their home for many months. Some women were fortunate to have husbands who built flimsy cabins or shacks, while other women found themselves huddling under the worn out canvas inside their wagons in which they had crossed the plains. None of these circumstances were what was expected or ever dealt with back East. How could a woman practice her skills of womanhood if there was no suitable place to do so? In reading the diary of Louise Clapper, better known as Dame Shirley, there is evidence of her California dwelling. Dame Shirley writes in a letter that in order to get to her log cabin that her husband had built for her, they had to walk through a hotel with a barroom often times occupied by men who were drunk. At all costs, they would bypass the bar. Dame Shirley claimed,

“That it is no place for a lady.”⁵² In the same letter, she attests to the fact that there are no churches or newspapers within the mining community. These both illustrate that the American, East coast society that she was used to was not available in California. This would have an effect on the way that Dame Shirley could accomplish her tasks of true womanhood.⁵³

Homes on the frontier were an integral part of how a woman displayed her womanhood because they were tied with the idea of civilization and domesticity of true womanhood. Men were supposed to come to California to find adventure and to seek their fortune in gold. Women on the other hand were supposed to follow them and bring civilization with them,⁵⁴ which included the four parts of true womanhood, piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness.⁵⁵ Domesticity was one link to civilization and was connected to the idea of womanhood. Although this idea of bringing civilization to the mining town may not seem complicated, there were many factors that kept many women from succeeding.

Two of the terrible evils of the mining camps were liquor and gambling.⁵⁶ Not only did this affect the attitudes of the men when they came home drunk, but it financially hurt the family as well. Gold was not as easily acquired as many of these gold seekers believed it to be. What money many men were able to find in the mines or streams, many lost gambling or getting drunk. Many of the women were not concerned with the fact that their homes were not as “domestic” as they used to be in the East

⁵² Louise A.K.S. Clappe (Dame Shirley), *The Shirley Letters*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983), 50.

⁵³ Clappe, 54.

⁵⁴ Butruille, 6.

⁵⁵ Roberts, 150.

⁵⁶ Butruille, 236.

because they were spending their time and effort on new businesses. Upon arriving in California, Luzena Stanley Wilson did not have a tent to stay in, and so she converted her wagon into a temporary home.⁵⁷ She saw the other boarding houses that women had set up, and quickly made a rickshaw table and cooked up a meal for the miners. When her husband came back from mining, she had made more money than the value of the gold he had mined. She already had customers who said that they would be regulars at her make-shift restaurant.⁵⁸ Women like Luzena realized that there was more money to be made by serving the miners than in mining.

Some of the women who owned boarding houses wrote accounts of their living quarters. Curtains were hung to separate the miners' sleeping quarters from the families, yet they were often never closed for privacy. Beds were not comfortable either. A woman explained that though she was able to sleep on a cot, there were no blankets or pillows so they would bundle extra clothes and use them as pillows.⁵⁹ Not only did these women have to deal with cooking outside, they had to live with animals inside. In one woman's home, she explained that there were no doors off the kitchen or the dining room. These missing doors let hogs and mules come into the house.⁶⁰ Most women also had to be skilled with a Dutch oven and open fire rather than a cooking stove.⁶¹ Of the women who lived in Nevada City in 1850, twelve lived in their own boarding houses and three others lived with their families in taverns which also boarded people.⁶² Eleanor

⁵⁷ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 57.

⁵⁸ Chartier, 12.

⁵⁹ Holmes, 272.

⁶⁰ Jo Ann Levy, *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1990), 96.

⁶¹ Holmes, 272.

⁶² Levy, 101.

Dumont was a gambler in California, and her home existed within her established gambling den in 1854.⁶³

Laundresses at Washerwomen's Bay had small tents that made up their homes.⁶⁴ Many women did try to make their homes more warm and domestic. Some used surveyor maps as wall paper because they had colors in them.⁶⁵ Other women tried to make curtains with paper or cloth.⁶⁶ One woman even cut a branch, placed flowers on it, and set it outside her window to add color.⁶⁷ These women did what they could, but the circumstances did not give much for the women to work with.

All of these women needed to keep a home for their families. Yet when there became a need to work in order to survive, many women had to weigh the importance of domesticity and survival. Keeping house had been important to the ideal of true womanhood, yet in the mining fields, many times it was impossible. These situations left many women unable to truly reach the ideal criteria of a true womanhood's household.

While viewing the many accounts of these women, it seems that they did not desire to walk away from their ideas of womanhood and domesticity. On the contrary, many women did try to provide these attributes to their life, but it was difficult to do so given the living situations. Some women did abandon the ideal of true womanhood altogether, yet many others kept to the guidelines of true womanhood or made alterations to them.

⁶³ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 48.

⁶⁴ Levy, 102.

⁶⁵ Sandra L. Meyers, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915*, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 145.

⁶⁶ Meyers, 146

⁶⁷ Meyers, 145.

In the same way, one can view women's dress and attire as a way to see if true womanhood was possible in California. The Cult of True Womanhood defined how women were supposed to dress in order to uphold the four founding principles. Soft skin that had not been touched by the sun was what was expected or desired. Having come across the trail over the plains, many of these women had calloused hands and dark, sun-kissed skin. Dresses which were to remain clean were ragged and torn from the crossing.⁶⁸ One woman explained that having arrived in California; she had to continue to make meals over an open fire with her Dutch oven. Wind would blow her skirt and flames would lick the edges or spark and burn holes in the fabric. Because of these conditions, many women chose to don bloomers which were easier to work with. Amelia Bloomer was an avid supporter of women's rights and created women's bloomers,⁶⁹ loose, fitting pants. Though these women may not have been concerned with all the ideas of women's rights, some did find the bloomers much more practical for their living conditions. Alonzo Delano, in his journal of travels in California, remembers a married Mexican woman walking down the street wearing men's clothes. He joked that her husband should begin to wear her petticoats.⁷⁰

While women were supposed to keep to feminine attire, many began donning male clothing upon arriving on the frontier. Women found these articles of clothing to be more sensible in the environment. By wearing bloomers, women took less chances of burning their skirts on the cooking fires. Miriam Colt explained, "The bottoms of our

⁶⁸ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 57.

⁶⁹ Holmes, 15.

⁷⁰ Irving McKee ed., *Alonzo Delano's California correspondence: being letter hitherto uncollected from Ottawa (Illinois) Free Trade and the New Orleans True Delta, 1849-1852* (Sacramento, CA: Sacramento Book Collectors Club, 1952), 88.

dresses were burnt full of holes.”⁷¹ Some men saw this and were shocked at the way women wore them in the streets. “Am wearing the Bloomer dresses now; find they are well suited to a wild life like mine,”⁷² relays how Colt remembered the usefulness of her bloomers. True womanhood was not always something that could be carried out on the gold fields of California.

Although it seems that most of the women still wore skirts, it does not appear that women wore bloomers to be rebellious. It was rather a practicality. One woman explained that she hauled wood from the hills and chopped it entirely by herself. She claims that not a single person helped her in these daily chores.⁷³ Some women admitted that in California, women did tasks that their servants would not imagine doing.⁷⁴ There was a need for many of these women to abandon the more stylish clothing that they once adorned themselves with. This was not a sign of rebellion, but of alteration or adaptation to the surroundings and work roles.

Of course there were women who did dress in a more “refined” way. A woman who called a meeting of all the laundresses at Washerwomen’s Bay in San Francisco⁷⁵ wore a rich shawl and shirred hat with a feather.⁷⁶ This example demonstrates that this woman had some type of status since she was the spokesperson for all the washer women. Many of these women did make a considerable amount of money as well.⁷⁷ Lotta Crabtree who had grown up singing and dancing for gold nuggets to support her family, still dressed in fancy shorter skirts as she became older. She chose her attire

⁷¹ Meyers, 147

⁷² Butruille, 103

⁷³ Levy, 94.

⁷⁴ Levy, 98.

⁷⁵ Levy, 103

⁷⁶ Levy, 104.

⁷⁷ Levy, 104.

because she was an entertainer who had acquired huge sums of money and was not bound to work with her hands in the mining camps.⁷⁸ Her mother also benefited from Lotta's career, and she also dressed in fancy princess style frocks.⁷⁹ J.D. Borthwick remembers some Mexican women on Sunday wearing beautiful gowns of white.⁸⁰ He describes a Chinese woman dressed in European clothes as well.⁸¹

Within these mining communities, there were many jobs that a woman might take on to support her family. As previously discussed, many of these jobs would not fall under the acceptable guidelines of true womanhood, yet these women needed them in order to survive in the wild land of California. Some women took to the mine fields looking for the gleaming rocks for themselves. Since many women did not invest their time in the gold fields, there was not much competition for those that did.⁸² There is an instance where Friedrich Gerstäcker wrote of a Mexican woman he had seen mining with two men as he passed through California.⁸³ Most women in California took on such tasks as running boarding houses with meals for the miners or doing the laundry for the men who had no idea or desire to clean their filthy clothes. Charity Hayward found that her husband was not able to supply enough money for the family. Not wanting her husband to know that he was not providing enough, she began taking opportunities to clean and sew for some of the miners.⁸⁴

Women who established themselves along the edges of Washerwomen's Bay, were able to make \$8.00 for a dozen pieces of clothing washed. With this type of pay,

⁷⁸ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 36.

⁷⁹ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 31.

⁸⁰ J.D. Borthwick, *Three Years in California* (Edinburgh, London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1857), 86

⁸¹ Borthwick, 330.

⁸² Levy, 105.

⁸³ Friedrich Gerstäcker *Scenes of Life in California*, (Germany, 1856), 95.

⁸⁴ Levy, 105.

these women were sometimes able to make double what a U.S. Member of Congress would make at that time.⁸⁵ These women, along with the men who later joined them, realized that they could make a great amount of money. They had meetings that referred to the prices that were charged for services. Fluctuating prices for soap was one example of why the prices for laundry would change. In one instance, a woman led the meeting, showing her rising status within the laundry community.⁸⁶

Many diaries emphasize the economic opportunities in running a boarding house. Luzena Stanley Wilson set up a quick table and began to serve a simple meal to miners after one miner had paid her \$10.00 for some biscuits.⁸⁷ She began calling her establishment the “El Dorado.” Her husband became a partner with her, making more money with the business than from the gold that could be extracted from the streams.⁸⁸ They soon made enough money to build a boarding house and store. Amazingly, she was able to start a bank as well, hiding the money underneath her as she slept.⁸⁹ Cooking and boarding were wonderful sources of wealth; men offering \$16.00 a week. These meals were not expected to be anything extravagant. Men were pleased with boiled meat and potatoes.⁹⁰ Some women had large enough establishments that they could board anywhere from 75-200 boarders over an entire week.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Levy, 102.

⁸⁶ Levy, 104.

⁸⁷ Levy, 91.

⁸⁸ Levy, 102.

⁸⁹ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 59.

⁹⁰ Levy, 92.

⁹¹ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 58.



Figure 2 Unidentified women washing in California from Cathy Luchetti, *Women of the West*, (St. George, Utah: Antelope Island Press, 1982), 225.

One woman offered milk at her boarding house. This rare commodity enabled her to compete with other boarding houses. Knowing that this would draw miners, she added a cup of milk for each man who ate at her establishment. One woman sold milk for a dollar a pint even though one miner claimed that it was half water.⁹² Another rarity on the mining field was baked pies. Many women would sell baked pies as a business. One woman sold 1,200 pies in one month. She totaled her earnings from baking pies to be \$18,000. Mary Jane Caples would sell fruit pies for \$1.25 and minced meat pies for \$1.50. These women were ingenious as they found items that men craved and would spend handsomely to have.

Of course providing housing and meals to the miners was not the only job that women did to earn money. Some women used their entertainment to lure the gold nuggets from the men. Lotta Crabtree was merely a child when she started receiving

⁹² Levy, 95.

money to dance. Her dancing reminded men of their children back home.⁹³ Her father had left the family to survive on their own, but he came back and moved the family to Grass Valley. Lotta's mother wanted her daughter to keep pursuing dancing, and so she enrolled her in a dancing school.⁹⁴ Soon her father left again⁹⁵ and Lotta began dancing at the saloons bringing in \$13.00 a night. Finally, moving to San Francisco to earn more money,⁹⁶ Lotta was able to accumulate the sum of \$42,000 by 1863.⁹⁷

Prostitutes found the gold fields very profitable with many men seeking womanly comfort. Women worked in saloons or gambling dens and men would pay out \$200-\$400 a night to these women.⁹⁸ Many times these women would also get these men drunk and then search through their pockets for more gold or money. Eleanor Dumont was a woman who owned a gambling den. She was one of the best card players around and could strip any man of his findings for the day.⁹⁹ Though a harsh looking woman, due probably to the drinking and lifestyle, she still fell for the sweet talk of men.¹⁰⁰ She was not a woman who other women looked at with any respect whatsoever.¹⁰¹

There were many more Chinese prostitutes than any other ethnicity. During 1860, over 85 percent of the Chinese women who came to America were prostitutes.¹⁰² These women were often times sold by their parents in China for as little as \$50. Chinese women were to serve a contract of 4-6 years, and many did not survive long enough to fulfill their contracts. Some women, with the help of men who had fallen in love with

⁹³ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 31.

⁹⁴ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 33.

⁹⁵ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 34.

⁹⁶ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 35.

⁹⁷ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 36.

⁹⁸ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 12.

⁹⁹ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 50.

¹⁰¹ Chartier, *With Great Hope*, 49.

¹⁰² Yung, *Unbound Voices*, Young, 124

them, were able to escape the terrible brothels.¹⁰³ Some Chinese women were hired entirely for their presence. Borthwick in his writings of the gold rush does include a description of a Chinese woman dressed in European clothes with a extremely clean house. She would serve drinks to men who came inside to listen to the Chinese men sing.¹⁰⁴ When asked if the woman was one of the man's wives, the Chinese man explained that she was only hired for show.¹⁰⁵



Figure 3 The Quinn family, San Diego, California, 1899 in Cathy Luchetti, *Women of the West*, (St. George, Utah: Antelope Island Press, 1982), 21.

Some rare jobs found in the California gold mines were that of a woman who took care of children, even nursing them. It was a day care of the 19th century. Was this because many of the women were enveloped in the tasks of running boarding houses and feeding miners? Bethenia Owens tried to become a doctor after she divorced her husband. She was admitted and graduated from a medical school, yet she lost the respect

¹⁰³ Yung, *Unbound Voices*, 125

¹⁰⁴ Borthwick, 330

¹⁰⁵ Borthwick 331

of her entire family including her son who she loved dearly. Being a nurse was acceptable for women, but not the career of a doctor.¹⁰⁶

While many of these women seem to be coming either from different countries or the East Coast, they made money in order to survive on the new frontier. Many of these women followed their husbands in their dreams to make a fortune in California. Upon arriving and realizing that great wealth was not the norm for many of the miners, many women found it necessary to find work of their own to help provide necessities for the family. There were different degrees as to what this included. While some women tried to keep with the old ways of the East and make their homes colorful and warm, other women altered true womanhood to fit their environment.

The majority of women who seem to be presented in the journals and letters from the mining camps are those who determined that the wild land of California would not let them practice all their ideas of true womanhood. They, therefore, made alterations to the social roles they were supposed to keep. This included many of the women undertaking jobs such as opening restaurants, boarding houses, and washing laundry. Each of these jobs was a normal activity of women, yet it was broadened into commercialization so as to bring in an income to help support their families. When a woman took on these types of activities, she was not abandoning her or society's ideas of true womanhood, but was simply altering them to fit with the circumstances that she was living in.

By studying these different cultures, historians try to understand what degree of American true womanhood ideas were influential. There are many cases where men looked down upon the way that other women acted, such as riding a horse astride. They even looked down upon Chinese women who were prostitutes who had no choice

¹⁰⁶ Ward ed., 81.

because they were trapped in the chains of slavery. With the racial bias that happens within the cultures, it is also hard to recognize whether some of these ideas about women's actions are more due to the idea of racial discrimination. There seems to be both ideas of racial discrimination and different ideas of true womanhood. Examples have been given of Mexican women working in the mines and wearing men's clothing. According to the American view of true womanhood these two activities go strictly against the guidelines of the social roles of women. Women were not supposed to wear men's trousers or to be serving drinks in a bar or saloon. On the new frontier there are many examples of these things taking place. It does not always seem to be associated with the idea of different cultures and their different views of womanhood, but rather the new life and circumstances that came with the taming of the gold country. In comparison with the idea of true womanhood, many of the different cultures had women who were not prescribing to what was acceptable. It leaves one to wonder whether this was because of their own ideas about true womanhood or the desire like many of the American women to just try and survive on the new soil of western America.

The themes of home, dress, and jobs seem to stand out in these articles. The way that women lived before and after their introduction to or rejection of the ideal of true womanhood can be seen in many of these examples. To have a true understanding of both the situation of the California women and the plight of the Chinese, Mexican, and Native American women, one must look at the changes that were thrust upon them when the traditional ideal of womanhood was introduced or stripped away. With these images and stories, historians can see how even today the idea of true womanhood is shaping our world and society. Such examples show how the idea of true womanhood affected the

lives of many women. It was a struggle for their own survival as to whether a woman lived with and accepted the conventional view of womanhood or if a woman disregarded it. The women in California would not have been able to survive in the new land if they had tried to keep the customs and traditions that they had in the East. Native American, Chinese, and Mexican women thought that they would only be allowed to exist in the changing world around them if they conformed to the American's idea of womanhood. These examples show lessons of what women learned and the desire they had to be successful in life. Lessons that were learned by these women are still relevant today.

Bibliography

- Blair, Karen J. ed. *Women in Pacific Northwest History*. Seattle : University of Washington Press, 2001
- Borthwick, J.D., *Three Years in California*. Edinburgh, London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1857
- Butruille, Susan G. *Women's Voices from the Western Frontier*. Boise, ID: Tamarack Books, 1995.
- Chartier, JoAnn and Chris Enss ed. *With Great Hope*. Helena, MT: Falcon Publishing, 2000.
- Chartier, Joann and Chris Enss. *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 2004.
- Clappe, Louise A.K.S. (Dame Shirley). *The Shirley Letters*. Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983.
- Gerstäcker, Friedrich. *Scenes of life in California*. Germany, 1856
- Holmes, Kenneth L. ed. *Covered Wagon Women*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
- Jameson, Elizabeth. "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers," in *The Women's West*, London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.
- Kelley, Mary. "Beyond the Boundaries." *Journal of the Early Republic* 21 (2001)
- Levy, Jo Ann. *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1990.
- Luchetti, Cathy. *Women of the West*. St. George, Utah: Antelope Island Press, 1982.
- McKee, Irving ed., *Alonzo Delano's California correspondence: being letter hitherto uncollected from the Ottawa (Illinois) Free Trade and the New Orleans True Delta, 1849-1852*. Sacramento, CA: Sacramento Book Collectors Club, 1952.
- Perdue, Theda. *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835*. University of

- Nebraska Press, 1999
- Perdue, Theda. "Domesticating the Natives: Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood." in *Women, Families and Communities*, Vol. 1: To 1877, Nancy A. Hewitt, ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1990)
- Phillips, D.L., *Letters from California: its mountains, valleys, plains, lakes, rivers, climate, and productions. Letter No. XIII.* 1876
- Roberts, Mary Louise. "True Womanhood Revisited." *Journal of Women's History* 14 (2002)
- Rohrbough, Malcolm J. "Duty, Adventure, and Opportunity: Women and the California Gold Rush." *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* 5th edition. Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Rotundo, E. Anthony. "Community to Individual: The Transformation of Manhood at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," in *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) pp. 10-30
- Shirley, Gayle C. *More Than Petticoats: Remarkable Oregon Women.* CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1998.
- Tosh, John ed. *Historians on History.* New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2000.
- Ward, Jean M. and Elaine A. Maveety ed. *Pacific Northwest Women 1815-1925.* Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 1995.
- Welter, Barbara "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966)
- Yung, Judy, *Unbound Feet.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995
- Yung, Judy *Unbound Voices.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999 124.
- California Gold Rush Stories: Becoming California, Don Baumgart, 2001 4/15/2005
<http://www.ncgold.com/History/BecomingCA_Archives5.html>
- The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, 2002, 4/15/2005
<<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist5/foremoms.html>>