DAILY LIFE ON THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN FRONTIER

Mary Ellen Jones

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Among the traditional Algonquian-speaking peoples
the Olammapise
is
Principal Story-teller,
Truth Teller,
guardian and conveyer of the Nation's values,
heritage, and culture.

This book is dedicated to three olammapise:
John Jakes, in literature;
Donald R. Perkins, in public relations;
and Herman J. Viola, in history—
truth tellers all.

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To the olammapise who continue to inspire by example, thanks.

And, most of all, to those who lived the frontier experience, thanks.

John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872. Reproduced from the collections of the Library of Congress. The land, the bison, and the Indians eventually yielded to the spirit of Manifest Destiny, here portrayed stringing telegraph wires across the Plains and leading a parade of progress.

Introduction

> The land was ours before we were the land's.

Robert Frost read this line from "The Gift Outright" at the inauguration of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, progenitor of the congerie of ideas that would be known as the New Frontier. In this poem Frost captures the complex reciprocal relationship between people and their land: they planted new crops in newly cut clearings; diverted rivers and built roads; hunted deer and buffalo and trapped beaver; mined gold and silver and other, less precious minerals; established trading posts and forts and towns. And, in the process, they changed. To survive on the land, to change the land, they had to adapt to the land. And so, gradually, they became Americans, having given themselves "outright to the land vaguely realizing westward."

Though the process continued for almost 400 years from Columbus's arrival until the 1890 declaration by the Bureau of the Census that the frontier was no more, this book concentrates on the nineteenth century, a period during which the process gained almost frightening momentum as people flooded into the trans-Appalachian and, especially, trans-Mississippi West in search of land, fortune, a new start, freedom—themselves. The focus of this book is on the fur frontier, the explorers' frontier, the gold frontier, the frontiers of the cowboy and homesteader and soldier—and of the Native Americans with whom they traded and loved and fought. Of necessity, much has been left out—the Mormon handcart

brigades, the Donner Party, the migration to Oregon, western desperadoes and their sheriff nemeses. The focus, too, is on social rather than military or political history. The intent is to give a sense of the extraordinary ordinariness of surviving, prospering, failing, and dying in a new land; to explore how westering Americans "gave [themselves] outright . . . to the land" and became her people while, inevitably, disowning those already bound to that same land by tradition, culture, and religion.

Chronology

1763	Proclamation of 1763. King George declares all land west of the Appalachians off limits to colonial settlers, an exercise in futility since the lure of the West is far stronger than an unenforceable proclamation.
1803	Thomas Jefferson purchases the Louisiana Territory from France.
1804–6	Lewis and Clark conduct their expedition to the Pacific and back.
1822	Rocky Mountain Fur Company is established by William Ashley; instead of establishing permanent forts, he inaugurates the annual rendezvous where trappers and Indians meet traders to barter furs for whiskey, ammunition, and supplies.
1840	The last fur trading rendezvous takes place; trade shifts from beaver to buffalo and from rendezvous to forts.
1841	Immigration to Oregon begins with a small party moving through the South Pass.
1846–48	War with Mexico.
1848	January 24. James Marshall discovers gold at Coloma, California.
1850	California statehood.
1854	Kansas-Nebraska Act; the United States acquires Indian Territory.
1860–61	The Pony Express runs between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California.
1861–65	The Civil War.

1861	Telegraph connection between east and west coasts makes the Pony Express obsolete.
	Theodore Judah surveys the route through the Sierra Nevada for a transcontinental railroad.
1862	Homestead Act and Transcontinental Railroad Acts are passed by Congress.
1864	Sand Creek Massacre.
1866	Long cattle drives begin; the first trail herds arrive at Abilene, Kansas, in 1867.
1868	Battle of Washita; Seventh Cavalry defeats the Cheyenne in Oklahoma.
	U.S. treaty with the Nez Percé is the last of three hundred treaties with Indians in one hundred years.
1869	May 10. The Golden Spike joins the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads at Promontory Point, Utah.
1873	Barbed wire is invented.
1876	Battle of the Little Bighorn; the Seventh Cavalry, under Gen. George Armstrong Custer, is soundly defeated.
1882	Buffalo Bill Cody presents his first Wild West Show.
1889	April 22. Oklahoma land rush begins.
1890	Debacle at Wounded Knee, the last major confrontation between U.S. troops and Indians.
	The Bureau of the Census declares there is no longer any "free land"; the frontier is thus closed.
1893	Frederick Jackson Turner presents "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at the American Historical Association meeting during the Chicago World's Fair.

1

The American Frontier: Simple Stereotype, Complex Reality

Sarah Atherton nursed her youngest, Jamie, as she stared out to the west. They'd been on the trail now for almost seven weeks and life had settled into a daily rhythm, different from home but comfortable nonetheless. Billy and Caroline had already come in from gathering buffalo chips for this evening's cook fire. Supper would be simple again—bacon and corn bread from provisions they'd bought at St. Joseph. It was late already. Even though they'd been held up this morning after an axle broke on their neighbor's wagon, they'd pressed on to find a stream for the oxen. Day by day, water was getting harder to find.

Sarah stared off to the west, her eyes burning. The dust was everywhere, and since early afternoon she'd been staring into the sun; her sunbonnet offered little protection. Her husband, Jed, had just dragged in, empty-handed, as tired as the hound dog at his heels. He'd had no luck hunting—again. Too many wagons had passed this way before them.

Jed and some of the other men trudged toward the creek. Tonight, instead of hobbling the animals and letting them find whatever blades of grass they could, they planned to pen them inside the circle of wagons. There'd been rumors. The Indians were no longer satisfied with "begging"; angered at the hordes of whites passing through their land, killing or frightening off the game, they'd begun to resort to violence. Sarah watched, lulled by Jamie's sucking.

Suddenly on the western horizon black dots appeared against the red sky. How far away Sarah couldn't tell—perspective was difficult on these treeless plains—but they grew rapidly larger. Horsemen. Indians. Riding fast.

Jed and the other men had gotten nearly all the oxen into the makeshift corral of wagons when the usually placid animals stampeded, spooked by the high-pitched yipping of the half-naked savages. Pawnees? Sioux? She couldn't tell. It didn't

matter. The men dragged the final, ninth wagon into place. Too late for the livestock, but maybe in time for the families.

Sarah passed the baby to Caroline and jumped down beside Jed behind the inside front wagon wheel. She peered between the spokes. With blood-curdling howls the Indians rode, circling on their fleet spotted ponies, so different from the draft horses she'd known back in Ohio. Faces painted, half black, half blue, doubly sinister, the Indians rode, feather headdresses streaming behind. Masters of their mounts, they rode with their knees, reaching into their quivers, notching arrows into their bowstrings, letting fly. Jed, his brother Jason, and the rest of the men returned fire . . .

Night fell. The longest of her life. Sarah wondered whether it would be her last . . .

Fire arrows had burned the canvas of six wagons. The others were ablaze, no water to put them out. Beating at the flames with a blanket, Sarah saw her household goods—the children's clothing, the cherry bedstead crafted by her Pa, her few precious books—catch fire. The air reeked of scorched cornmeal, Jed's aromatic tobacco, Caroline's corncob doll. Jed lay wounded, an arrow protruding from his groin, his pants soaked in blood. A neighbor woman shrieked, her shoulder shattered by a gunshot. Sarah had heard the Indians could get weapons at the trading posts, and she feared the "thunk" of bullets into the wooden sides of the wagons as much as she did the mysterious noises—animals or Indians or her imagination?—in the sudden silence that had fallen just beyond the circle of charred wagons.

The night seemed endless. Daybreak would bring hope, she felt. At least she could see *the dangers they faced. But just before dawn the circling, shrieking savages started up again. Could this little band hold out against so many Indians? For how long? They'd drunk most of the water that the children had fetched yesterday from the creek. Some of the rest she'd used to clean wounds.*

The baby whimpered. The wounded moaned. Billy and Caroline were too scared to cry. Jed lay grimly silent, counting his remaining bullets. And then, as the sun began to rise, the Indians grew uneasy, then wary. From over the slight rise to the east came new sounds—the thunder of galloping horses shod in iron, the jingle of bits and harness and the bright clarion call of an army bugle. Over the rise rode the Cavalry, blue clad, gold neckerchiefs knotted, gold and red guidon flags—and the streaming red, white, and blue. Rapid fire, pop-pop-pop. Screaming ponies felled by bullets pinned their riders. The firefight was brief. Within minutes those Indians who could galloped away.

Sarah dared breathe again—and hope. Though they'd lost a lot, they were still alive. The men would ride out with the soldiers to round up animals that had stampeded last evening. They'd get medical attention and replace supplies at the fort. And then they'd ride on—toward the West.

This image of the frontier has been bred into generations of Americans by our popular culture—from Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show and Beadle's Dime Novels to John Wayne's cinema epics. Although it suggests *some* of the truths of America's westering process, it does not hint at the whole story. The problem is not simply its romanticizing the past. Far more significant is its fundamental imprecision and over-

simplification. For this mythic American frontier is fixed in place and time: the Great Plains from roughly 1840 to 1870. In reality, it took almost 300 years for the frontier to move across a 3,000-mile-wide continent.

To focus only on the Great Plains is to ignore the continent's magnitude and the consequent diversity of relationships between man and the land. Today's fifty states incorporate an area of 3,618,770 square miles: 3,539,289 square miles of land, 79,481 square miles of water (*U.S. Atlas for the Macintosh*). In comparison, England has an area of 50,874 square miles; Great Britain, 89,041 (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*). The highest elevation in the United States is Alaska's Mt. McKinley at 20,320 feet; the lowest, Death Valley at 282 feet below sea level. Temperatures range from 134° to −86° Fahrenheit (*U.S. Atlas for the Macintosh*).

The midsection of the United States is watered by the Mississippi River, flowing 2,330 miles from northern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico, and its two major tributaries—the Missouri, flowing southeast from Montana for 2,465 miles, and the Ohio, flowing southwest from Pittsburgh for 981 miles. This midsection is bracketed by the Appalachian Mountains (a 1,500-mile chain, extending from southern Quebec to northern Alabama; its highest peak is Mt. Mitchell, North Carolina, at 6,711 feet) and the Rocky Mountains (extending from New Mexico to Alaska, its highest point in "the lower forty-eight" is Mt. Elbert, Colorado, at 14,431 feet) (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*). A cursory glance at a contemporary Burpee seed catalogue reveals eleven U.S. Department of Agriculture hardiness zones for plants based on average annual temperatures, though the editors warn gardeners that "even on a small property . . . many factors such as sun, wind, rainfall, snow cover, and slope (north or south facing) create changes in microclimate" (*Burpee Gardens 1996: 120th Anniversary Edition*). *USA Today* for June 25, 1996, notes temperature ranges from 103°/72° Fahrenheit (Tucson, Arizona) to 67°/50° Fahrenheit (Marquette, Michigan); on that day it snowed near Lake Tahoe, California.

For all the pioneers heading west, such variety in terrain and climate posed a myriad of questions. Where was a good pass through the mountains? How wide were the deserts? How early did grass flourish along a proposed route? Where were salt deposits? When was the last—and the first—major snowfall? How wide were rivers—and were there any fords making them passable? More so than for many nations, America's history has been affected by physical reality. Henry Nash Smith made this point quite succinctly: "The character of the American empire was defined not by streams of influence out of the past, not by a cultural tradition, nor by its place in a world community, but by a relation between man and nature" (*Virgin Land* 187).

It is crucial when examining the American frontier to specify what

year, what decade, even what century is under consideration. Fixing the mythic American frontier experience in the thirty-year period spanning the Civil War also creates misperceptions and inaccuracies. *How* did one go west? Daniel Boone's trek into Kentucky in the early 1770s was by foot and pack horse; those taking the Oregon/California Trail between 1840 and 1860 mostly used ox-drawn wagons, though some simply walked and others transported their property in wheelbarrows or handcarts; European immigrants to the northern Plains in the 1870s and 1880s arrived by train. With the advance of time came advances in technology, which, in turn, speeded the pace of westering. On the Missouri River, for example, during the relatively brief life span of the fur frontier, transportation developed from the bull boat (made of buffalo hides) to the keelboat and then the steamboat. Moreover, as time passed, travelers knew more about their routes and their destinations.

In 1492 Christopher Columbus had known where he was going but had no idea where he had arrived; when James Fenimore Cooper's father bought 40,000 acres in western New York in 1786, he had only vague knowledge beforehand as to the exact location of features such as lakes and rivers; but through the 1840s and 1850s the Corps of Topographical Engineers accomplished significant advancements in exploration, survey, and road-building efforts in the trans-Mississippi West.

Official policy toward the West also varied tremendously. The Proclamation of 1763 forbade settlement beyond the sources of the rivers flowing into the Atlantic, and even so exuberant an expansionist as Thomas Hart Benton could argue in 1825 that the Rocky Mountains were a convenient natural western boundary for the United States, a location where "the statue of the fabled god, Terminus, should be raised . . . , never to be thrown down" (qtd. in Smith, *Virgin Land* 26). Yet in 1804 Thomas Jefferson had sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their expedition of exploration, following quickly on the dubiously constitutional 1803 Louisiana Purchase. *When* one captures a still frame of the constantly moving frontier results in vastly different pictures.

Other variables complicate the picture further. For example, was westering a gradual advance into contiguous territory (as occurred mainly east of the Mississippi), or did migration leap over half a continent, with most of the intervening land to be occupied later (as on the Oregon and California Trails—exacerbated by the discovery of gold)? What was the relation to the native inhabitants of the land? Although initial contact was usually benign, even friendly, relationships worsened over time—for a variety of reasons. Even during the same period, major differences occurred. During colonial times most eastern Indians preferred the French to the English because of their land policy. When whites were captured, most longed for repatriation; but others were happily assimilated into their new culture. And responses to atrocities such as the Sand

Creek Massacre ranged from celebrations by the citizens of Denver to condemnation by U.S. Army regulars. What means were there in the frontier West of enforcing law and order? Even though the myth portrays the Cavalry riding to the rescue, forts were often widely spaced and undermanned; many laws were blithely ignored; and new law was often made up as the situation warranted.

One of the first historians to consider such complexities, especially that of man's relation to the land, was Frederick Jackson Turner who presented his landmark essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," to the American Historical Association meeting in 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair. Countering then-dominant schools of American historians, those interpreting U.S. history in light of the slavery controversy and those explaining U.S. institutions as products of English or Teutonic "germs" planted in the New World, Turner advanced a deceptively simple thesis: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Further, he emphasized the cyclical, organic process as Americans repeatedly adapted to a new environment. "The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life" (Turner, 3). The essay sparked discussion and debate that have continued to this day.

The catalyst stimulating Turner's thought was the statement made in an 1890 bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports" (Turner, 3). Believing that until the 1890s the history of America had primarily been one of the "colonization of the Great West," Turner recognized the end of an era and the need to assess this historical Terminus.

Turner first established a clear definition of the American frontier. It is sharply different from a frontier in Europe, which was "a fortified boundary line running through dense populations." Rather, it is the "further edge of free land," defined by the Bureau of the Census as "that margin of settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile." (For comparison, the 1990 population density of the United States was 70.33 persons per square mile.) Turner amplified: "the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (4).

While Turner advanced a startling new interpretation of American history, he also reflected his time, which was more agrarian, nationalistic, and ethnocentric than the present. For instance, the two people per square mile of which the Census Bureau wrote did not include Native Americans. Implicit in differentiating between the American frontier and the European one, there is a denial of autonomy granted to sovereign states. Indians, uncounted in the census, were expected to respond to an "invasion" of their territory with greater equanimity than would, say, France invaded by Germany. Moreover, the "border between savagery and civilization" discounted Native American culture. If, indeed, one recognizes that the prevalent nineteenth century American belief was that civilization depends on agriculture (Smith, *Virgin Land* 176), government policy toward Native Americans becomes more understandable. A corollary was the tendency of many, in the East, to view as little more than barbarians those whites who chose life on the frontier.

Numerous theoretical discussions of the concept of civilization were published in Europe and America during the eighteenth century. Most argued that "all human societies pass through the same series of social stages in the course of their evolution upward from barbarism toward the goal of universal enlightenment." Some suggested that civilization begins only when a society adopts an agricultural way of life (Smith, *Virgin Land* 218; see also Beard and Beard, *Rise of American Civilization*). Thomas Jefferson described sequential stages of civilization in a passage that anticipates some of Turner's imagery:

> Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our sea-coast. [At that time there was only one seacoast.] These he would observe in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, [eating] and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would next find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals, to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day. (qtd. in Smith, 219)

One difference between Turner and many of the previous theorists is that rather than adopting a judgmental, moralistic, and hierarchical view of the representative stages of frontier settlement, his style is descriptive and his tone pragmatic as he examined the impact of man's interaction with the land.

Another major point in Turner's thesis is that "the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist" (5). He described how the European must adapt to his environment in virtually every aspect of culture: dress, food, tools, modes of travel, ways of thought. He must learn from the Indians how to survive, and though he may eventually master the wilderness, his experiences make him a new person, no longer European. As this process is repeated generation after generation, year after year, mile after mile, Turner argues, "the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe" (5).

This recurrent westering over time moved past a series of natural boundaries: the "fall line," the Alleghenies, the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, the Rocky Mountains, the deserts. If, instead of freeze-framing the procession west temporally, to a specific date, one were to assume a single physical point of view over many years, one could see a colorful procession. Turner wrote:

> Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between. The unequal rate of advance compels us to distinguish the frontier into the trader's frontier, the rancher's frontier or the miner's frontier, and the farmer's frontier. When the mines and cowpens were still near the fall line, the traders' pack trains were tinkling across the Alleghenies, and the French on the Great Lakes were fortifying their posts, alarmed by the British trader's birch canoe. When the trappers scaled the Rockies, the farmer was still near the mouth of the Missouri. (10)

His observation has had profound impact on the organization of this book.

Ultimately, Turner argued, this process resulted in common traits that define the American character:

> To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with free-

> dom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (27)

Such observations intensify one's awareness of the diversity, complexity, and contradictions in any assessment of the American frontier experience. This variety is especially clear when one considers the reasons Americans went west. Some reasons reflect national policy (Manifest Destiny, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the 1846 war with Mexico); more reflect individual goals. Some verge on mysticism, as in Walt Whitman's poems "Pioneers, O Pioneers" and "Passage to India"; they have curiously contradictory themes of the oneness of all mankind, the wonders of technology, and a oneness with nature. (The California gold frontier suggests these themes may well be, in reality, mutually exclusive.) Other explanations reflect attempts to solve social inequities, as in the belief that the Homestead Act would attract laborers from the East, lessening the possibility of class conflict caused by workers being at the mercy of factory owners. Some raise issues of international politics: the overland emigrants of the 1840s wondered whether, once they reached California and Oregon, they would still be Americans—or Mexicans or Englishmen.

There were those who went west for religious motives: Mormons heading west to practice their religion safe from persecution, and missionaries wanting to convert and "civilize" Native Americans. Whereas many headed west to establish a permanent new life there, others, like most Forty-Niners, intended a brief, exploitative sojourn followed by a return to their homes in the East. There were fortune hunters in search of gold or land or railroad subsidies. There were tourists like Prince Maximilian von Wied, who came to hunt game and exotic experiences; and there were immigrants from Europe in search of the American dream.

Some brought civilization west. Others, like Simon Kenton, who mistakenly believed the law was after him and fled west to the wilds of Ohio, saw the West as an escape from civilization; they were, literally, outlaws. Washington Irving described them in *Astoria*: "new and mongrel races . . . the amalgamation of the 'debris' . . . of former races, civilized and savage; . . . adventurers and desperadoes of every class and country . . . ejected from the bosom of society into the wilderness" (qtd. in Smith, 177). Some Easterners viewed "all emigrants as actually or potentially criminal because of their flight from an orderly municipal life into frontier areas that were remote from centers of control" (Smith, 216). The Reverend Timothy Dwight, president of Yale, characterized the eighteenth century West as a vast septic system drawing off the depraved effluvia of New England (Smith, 216–17).

More sympathetically, Edmund Burke warned the House of Commons in 1775 about the consequences of passing unenforceable laws attempting to prevent settlement across the Alleghenies:

> If you stopped your [land] grants, what would be the consequence? The people would occupy without grants. They have already so occupied in many places. You can not station garrisons in every part of these deserts. . . . Already [settlers] have topped the Appalachian Mountains. From thence, they behold before them an immense plain, one vast, rich level meadow: a square of five hundred miles. Over this they would wander without a possibility of restraint; they would change their manners with their habits of life; would soon forget a government by which they were disowned; would become hordes of English Tartars; and, pouring down upon your unfortified frontiers a fierce and irresistible cavalry, become masters of your governors and your counselors, your collectors and comptrollers. . . . Such would, and in no long time must, be the effect of attempting to forbid as a crime and to suppress as an evil the command and blessing of Providence, 'Increase and multiply.' Such would be the . . . result of an endeavor to keep as a lair of wild beasts that earth which God, by an express charter, has given to the children of men. (Turner, 24–25)

In effect, government policy could *create* a lawless class.

Most, though, simply viewed the West as offering hope for a fresh start, for perennial rebirth, an opportunity to recover manhood, health, even virtue. In this light Timothy Flint, writing in 1827, described an agricultural utopia in the West in sharp contrast to the repressive conditions of industrial New England:

> Thousands of independent and happy yeomen, . . . who have emigrated from New England to Ohio and Indiana—with their numerous healthy and happy families about them, with the ample abundance which fills their granaries, with their young orchards, whose branches must be propped to sustain the weight of their fruit, . . . would hardly be willing to exchange their fee simple empires, their droves of cattle, horses, and domestic animals, and the ability to employ the leisure of half their time as they choose, for the interior of square stone or brick walls, to breathe floccules of cotton, and to contemplate the whirl of innumerable wheels for fourteen hours of six days of every week in the year [in the textile mills]. . . . Farmers and their children are strong, and innocent and moral almost of necessity. (qtd. in Smith, 139–40)

One can conclude, therefore, that neither while the frontier was still in existence (until 1890) nor since has there been a consensus describing or interpreting its meaning or significance. Like a kaleidoscope, the images are constantly reassembling into new patterns. The individual pieces, sometimes colorful, sometimes dull, are suspended in the fluid medium of the larger American culture. The image can, for an infinitesimal instant, be caught in time and space, but external forces—political, social, or economic—can, like the twist of a wrist, create new patterns. Thus, the daily life on the American frontier that follows is a diverse, often contradictory, always changing composite of the lives of individual Americans who, for whatever reason, sought out an ever-moving, ever-changing American frontier.

"Sarah Atherton" and her family are part of our frontier heritage—but only one part. In addition to the overlanders, mostly farmers, there were trappers and traders; explorers; miners and cowboys and soldiers; railroad construction workers and land speculators and boarding house operators; gamblers and dancers, doctors and missionaries. And there were the Indians, into whose land all the rest moved.

2

Life on the Fur Frontier

Christopher Columbus set out in 1492 to find a route to India and its riches. Although the search for a Northwest Passage persisted for another 300 years or so before it was as successful as the terrain allowed, America itself was full of natural riches that could be exploited. The first of these was fur and pelts.

Indeed, long before Spain or France or England sent explorers up tidal rivers of the eastern seacoast, overseas fishermen had established a fur trade with the Native Americans. Cartier's voyages of 1534 and 1535 found fishermen in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and on up the St. Lawrence River; having originally landed to dry their fish, they added to their ships' cargo furs procured from the Indians. Thus, the well-developed trade among Native American tribes became an embryonic international trade for furs (DeVoto, *Course of Empire* 90).

In 1764 Sir William Johnson, head of the northern section of the British Department of Indian Affairs, estimated that 10,000 Indians hunted in the watersheds of the upper Mississippi and the Great Lakes to exchange skins for British manufactured goods. In that same year Johnson estimated that traders annually bartered goods worth £100,000 for furs. A trader who was shrewd could make a 100 percent profit (Purvis, 78). When England ousted France from east of the Mississippi at the conclusion of the French and Indian War, the centers of the fur trade moved west to forts such as Detroit and Michilimackinac.

ECONOMICS

Prior to the American Revolution the North American fur trade was profitable, though the war and its antecedent disruptions caused some decline in exports. Beaver was the glamour fur, the dominant fur in the trade, but in addition the bear, fox, marten, mink, muskrat, otter, raccoon, wildcat, and wolf were trapped for their fur. In 1770, for example, 136,392 beaver worth £23,895 were exported from North America. In that same year ships carried the furs of 15,136 bears, 20,840 minks, 69,986 raccoons, and 6,581 wolves (Purvis, 79). In light of the Indian trade, it may be worth noting that in 1770 domestic rum production was 4,807,000 gallons, 30,000 of which went directly into the fur trade to supply the Indians' demand for "British milk" (Purvis, 81).

The deerskin trade was also important. In the 1580s Thomas Harriot's list of "Merchantable commodities" from the Roanoke colony included "Furres . . . great store of otters . . . [and] Deer skinnes dressed" (Furnas, 25). Growing steadily through the eighteenth century, the deerskin trade peaked in the decades before the Revolution. From 1768 to 1772, Great Britain imported an annual average of 721,558 pounds (in weight) of deerskins from its colonies south of Canada. These deerskins accounted for £69,443, or 25 percent of the exports of all thirteen colonies—more than the overseas sales of iron, naval stores, and whale oil (Purvis, 79). Already the peltry trade was part of a broad international trade; from 1790 to 1792 the destinations of American deerskins included England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Spain, Holland, Germany, and Denmark (Purvis, 80).

Beaver skins and buckskins became units of exchange in backcountry areas of the colonies, influencing not only the economy but also the language. In 1735 a trader complained about a clerk who had that day "sold only eight bucks of goods." And in 1748 the Indian agent Conrad Weiser told Ohio Indians, "Every cask of whiskey shall be sold to you for five bucks in your own town" (Furnas, 37).

Trade—in Weiser's case, deerskins for whiskey—demonstrates an important aspect of initial crosscultural contact: Europeans and Native Americans did not have the same interpretation of the value of material goods. This basis for misinterpretation dates back to 1492. Columbus's log for October 12 reads, "I want the natives to develop a friendly attitude towards us. . . . I therefore gave red caps to some and glass beads to others. They hung the beads around their necks. . . . And they took great pleasure in this and became so friendly that it was a marvel. They traded and gave everything they had with good will, but it seems they have very little and are poor in everything" (Fuson, 76). Not only does the passage suggest a political motive for trade (to "develop a friendly

attitude"), which became important later as France, England, Spain, and the United States competed for the Indians' allegiance, but it suggests a sharp dichotomy between two societies' definition of wealth. To Columbus, the natives were "poor in everything"; the Arawaks, however, didn't know they were poor. Indeed, they greeted the strangers with hospitality evidenced by gift-giving: parrots, balls of cotton thread, and "a kind of dry leaf." The representatives of one society were acting out of political or economic motives; the others, out of social motives. A mercantile society was meeting one that was not.

Wilcomb Washburn suggests that the Indians had

> no particular economic need for the products first offered by the Europeans . . . but received them gratefully for their decorative, aesthetic, magical, curiosity, or amusement "value." When [they] learned what pleased the European[s], the Indian[s] generously offered [their] "products"—such as gold ornaments—in measure that astounded the European[s] who thought in economic terms. This process continued, in some degree, until the Indian[s] adopted white economic values and placed on what [they] "gave" a price appropriate to the system of [their] European trading associate[s]. (Washburn, "Symbol, Utility and Aesthetics" 50)

There's a double failure of communication at first contact, no matter where on the continent it occurs, Washburn argues. Europeans fail to comprehend the importance of gift-giving in Indian culture—to establish rank or prestige, to mark important occasions in an individual's life, or to symbolize specific messages in intertribal diplomacy. Robert Rogers as governor at Michilimackinac argued strongly with his superiors that gifts should be given. However, they opposed giving "something for nothing," unable to understand the Indians' psychological and social values. As a corollary, many Indians, who had lived in harmony and balance with nature, could not understand whites' voracious demand for beaver. In 1804 a Mandan observed to Charles Mackenzie of the North West Company, "White people do not know how to live. [To seek beaver] they leave their houses in small parties, they risk their lives on the great waters, among strange nations [tribes], who will take them for enemies. What is the use of beaver? Do they make gun-powder for them? Do they preserve them from sickness? Do they serve them beyond the grave?" (Lavender, *Fist* 36).

Moreover, the European trade goods initially seemed to have little utilitarian value to the Indian. Washburn cites Thomas McCleish, the chief of the Hudson's Bay Company Fort York. He wrote in 1728 that the Indians turned practical, utilitarian objects into decorative ones:

"They always convert [kettles] in making fine [decorative] handcuffs and pouches which is of greater value with them than twice the price of the kettle" (Washburn, "Symbol, Utility and Aesthetics" 52).

The Europeans needed to create a demand in order to get their potential customers hooked. Once a dependency on European goods was established, the fur trade would be more profitable. Once the Indians learned that trade goods could make life easier, those goods would gain value. After all, making a canoe by cutting a tree with a sharpened stone and hollowing out the log with fire was simplified with a metal ax. Sewing was easier with a metal needle and silk or linen thread than with a bone awl and thread made of split animal sinew. An iron or copper kettle made cooking easier. Unlike an earthenware pot, it didn't break; it held water better than the most water-tight woven basket; it could be placed directly over the fire. Leather clothing, as David Thompson, mapmaker for the North West Company, noted, "when wet sticks to the skin and is very uncomfortable, requires time to dry, with caution to keep its shape. . . . Every [Indian] is glad . . . to change his leather dress, for one of woolen manufacture of England" (qtd. in Lavender, *Fist* 24).

Liquor could also make life easier—or seem to—and, despite protests of wise native leaders, missionaries, and governments, it soon became a staple in the fur trade.

Across the entire continent of North America, the fur trade was the "cutting edge of the frontier process." It had high potential for profit. Because furs were "low bulk and high demand," transportation costs over great distances could be offset. Moreover, when the Indian remained the primary "producer of the product" (i.e., did the trapping), there need not be a line item for salaries, as was required in the system inaugurated by William Ashley and followed by his successors (Wishart, 18).

The fur trader in America was, thus, a revolutionary force, creating ever-changing patterns of stability and instability among three major elements: the land itself, the Native Americans, and the Europeans or Euro-Americans. As we shall see, the land itself (geography, topography, plants, animals, and climate) was at first daunting to the newcomers. At every step the Euro-Americans had to learn how to survive in this land before they could prosper. And although the skills and knowledge learned at Michilimackinac, for example, could be adapted farther west, the diaries, logs, and journals of trappers and traders make constant reference to bitter cold, starvation when meat animals disappeared from a locale, and dangers of frostbite and snowblindness.

The Native American populations—with much broader experience—were well adapted to nature. Not only did they live in harmony with it, but it was intertwined with their religious beliefs and practices. Unlike Europeans, the Native Americans had no concept of land as private