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Keeping the Home Fires: The lives of Western women

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In elementary schools, children are exposed to only the most basic facts about the history of the United States. This exposure usually includes studying the presidents, some explorers and a few other people who played a role in the formation of this nation. With very few exceptions, those people are all men. Clearly there were women who supported the husbands, brothers and sons who made history. There were even women who were brave and bold enough to make a place for themselves in the record of this country. But there were many more about whom we are only beginning to learn who built homes and communities, raised families and contributed to the growth of this nation. I would like to use this unit of study to discover the lives of some of the women who helped to establish settlements in the West. This unit will be used with third and fourth grade students and will focus on the period of 1840 to 1880. It will be necessary, however, to provide a background for both students and teachers in the historical paths that led to this Westward expansion.

The area of this country that is known as the West is a vast expanse which is bordered by the Mississippi River on the east, the Pacific Ocean on the west, Canada to the north and Mexico to the south. In the history of the United States, this area has been called the West because that was its location in the U.S. government's Eurocentric point of view, but to the Spanish who came from Mexico it was the North. Other groups of adventurers came to this area hoping to claim a portion of it for their countries and for themselves. In the late seventeenth century, Russian explorers traveled east into what is now Canada and Alaska. Around the same period, the French began their explorations in a southerly direction down the Mississippi from Canada and the British secured a foothold in the Oregon Territory where present day Oregon and Washington states now exist by coming around Cape Horn and up the West coast .

But long before Europeans and Russians arrived in what is now know as the Americas, there were people who lived throughout these lands. When Columbus landed on Hispaniola, he thought he had landed in the East Indies and so he called the people he encountered "Indians." In North America, most of the nearly one thousand separate tribes or groups referred to themselves as "the people." Groups such as the Iroquois, the Navajo, the Lakota, the Tlingit, the Seminole, the Zuni, the Crow, the Mandan and the Apache thought of themselves as "the people," each group with its own set of traditions and stories about its origins. In what is now Mexico and Peru, there were large, complex and wealthy civilizations, with complex systems of government and religion and majestic buildings. In the early sixteenth century, Spanish explorers encountered first the Aztecs in Mexico and later the Incas in Peru and Ecuador. They found vast riches, gold and jewels, which they claimed in the name of their king and proceeded to pillage and plunder these magnificent civilizations and slaughter or enslave the populations.

In 1540, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado brought an expedition into what is present day New Mexico and Arizona. He was searching for the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola on behalf of the King of Spain. They were said to be repositories of gold and other riches. With him he brought Spanish soldiers and priests, Indian slaves, horses, guns, lances and at least three Spanish women. Following the Rio Grande northward, they came upon the the pueblo villages. At the Zuni pueblo, the Spaniards demanded food and other supplies. They also saw the opportunity to convert the Indians to Catholicism.

While Coronado did not find gold or other vast riches, he did encounter groups of people whose lives enriched those of the conquistadors beyond their imaginations. The people they encountered had a society which was quite different from that of the traditional European. While women performed the tasks of gathering and preparing food and tending the children, they were also quite literally responsible for the home. Not only did women build, repair and maintain their homes, the houses belonged to the women. When women married, their husbands came to live with the wife's family and eventually in her own home. Pueblo men assumed the major responsibility for hunting and growing crops such as corn, beans and squash. Women prepared and preserved the game and agricultural products and supplemented the food stores by gathering and preserving pinion nuts, berries and other wild plants. It was the men who grew cotton which they then spun and wove into cloth. It was noted in the diaries and journals of the Spanish settlers that Pueblo women were quite adept at decorating the woven cloth with intricate embroidery or painted designs and then creating articles of clothing or blankets.

The relationship between the Spanish and the Pueblo peoples did not seem to be especially hostile, even though the Indians were enlisted into servitude. The invaders needed the skills that these people possessed in order to survive in this uncompromising land. They found the women particularly attractive and unencumbered by the social mores of the Catholic Church. To the dismay of the priests and their superiors, many of the natives practiced polygamy or did not recognize virginity or fidelity as virtues. Consequently, there was a great deal of intermingling between the Indians and the Spanish resulting in a wide variety of mixed blood offspring, which included Mexican, African (who had been enslaved by the Spanish and brought to the New World) as well as the Spanish and the Indians.

As the years progressed, the Spanish continued their exploration of the Southwest including one which ventured into the Great Plains where they were astounded by the length of the grass, but did not find the legendary wealth and riches. However, there was no permanent Spanish settlement in this area until 1598, nine years before the English settlement at Jamestown in Virginia. Spain wanted to establish a foothold in the territory north of Mexico before other European nations claimed the land. They also saw the opportunity to convert the Indians they encountered to Christianity, which they did by force if necessary. Mission churches were built at every pueblo, most often by the Indians. However, the Indians were often able to hold on to parts of their own religions. The Spanish missionaries brought with them sheep and cattle as well as wheat, apples, plums and oranges. The conquistadors had brought horses years before which had been given or traded to the Indians.

There were other Indians in the area who were nomadic. They were the Navajo and the Apache and they had a long history of friendly trading relations with the Pueblo tribes. The Navajo and Apaches brought buffalo meat and hides to the Pueblos in exchange for dried beans and cotton blankets. These nomads were not especially interested in becoming servants to the Spanish nor in joining their church, but they were anxious to acquire the horses which would make their hunting forays more productive. Prior to acquiring the horse, the buffalo hunters hunted so on foot. Horses allowed the hunters to travel great distances to where the buffalo were in relatively short periods of time and gave the hunters a greater advantage than they had ever had

before. The women of these tribes traveled along with their husbands and fathers and families to provide the support needed during the hunting trips. When game was found and slaughtered, the band of Indians would make camp and prepare the meat for eating and storage, tan the hides for robes and tipis. These folks also intermingled with the Spanish, although initially not to the same degree as the Pueblo Indians, primarily because their nomadic life.

The Spanish continued their occupation of what is now New Mexico, for more than eighty years until their oppression of the Pueblo peoples caused the Indians to rise up in revolt in 1680. The Indians successfully drove the Spaniards out of what is now the Santa Fe area to the settlement at El Paso. The natives could have kept them out had they been more vigilant, but the Spaniards came back after a while to resume their mission of baptizing the Indians in order to save their souls. Along with their religion, they brought diseases such as small pox, cholera, tuberculosis and measles to which the Indians had no immunity. These illnesses wiped out thousands of native peoples and their traditional medicines and cures had no effect. Even their religions did not protect them from the new illnesses. The Spanish were able to secure their foothold in the Southwest and establish a territory which extended from what is present day Texas to California. Their influence was firmly entrenched.

Far to the North, eighteenth century French explorers sailed out of Canada down the Mississippi River claiming all the territory to its west up to the Rocky Mountains, naming it Louisiana in honor of France's King Louis XIV. British trappers continued to seek new sources for pelts, especially the highly prized beaver which were used to make hats that were in such great demand among the fashionable in Europe. The trappers moved south from Hudson Bay to explore new sources of their trade. They moved west as did the French adventurers, into the Rocky Mountains seeking a new life and fortune. Those people traveled alone, without the companionship or partnership of women, but as they became acquainted with the Indians who inhabited these areas, they found companionship in the company of Indian women. Marriages were established and families were begun.

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson negotiated the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France for the sum of fifteen million dollars. Jefferson was anxious to find a water route to the Pacific Ocean. In the fall of the following year he sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to lead an expedition which included a Black slave named York, to find a fabled Northwest Passage. They traveled up the Missouri River to the territory of the Mandan Indians where the explorers spent the winter. The Mandan people supplied them with corn, helped them hunt buffalo and told them what to expect. They hired a French fur trader and one of his Indian wives, a sixteen-year-old Shoshone named Sacajawea who had been kidnapped as a small girl. With them was their infant son, Jean Baptiste. Sacajawea and her husband were to serve as guides and translators for the party. It took the party four months to cross what is now Montana. They met no other people but discovered an astonishing number of animals in great abundance. The expedition was mapped and detailed by William Clark and his journal was later published.

The exploration party expected to find the Northwest Passage just beyond the head waters of the Missouri River. Instead, they came upon the Rocky Mountains which were far broader and higher than they had expected. The party needed horses instead of boats to cross the mountains. In what is now Idaho, they came upon a band of Shoshones who had large herds of horses. The Indians had never seen white men before and were suspicious of the expedition. Sacajawea recognized the chief of the Shoshones as her brother whom she had not seen since she had been kidnapped. With this fateful stroke of luck, the Lewis and Clark Expedition had all the horses they needed. They continued on their trek through the mountains by mid-September, but encountered snow and cold unlike anything they had expected. They were unprepared and probably would have perished had it not been for the Nez Perce Indians who gave them food and reassurance that they could

now reach the Pacific Ocean by water. They traveled down the Clearwater River to the Snake River and finally to the Columbia River where they met Indians who knew a few words of English. They also saw Indians wearing blue jackets and caps which had obviously been obtained from sailors who had come by ship around Cape Horn and up the west coast of the Northern Hemisphere. It was clear that the Pacific Ocean was near at hand.

Lewis and Clark's journey had been successful, although they had not found the fabled Northwest (water) Passage. They returned to Washington with their findings which were subsequently published. The abundance of game first brought Eastern hunters and trappers to the mountains. John Jacob Astor's Hudson Bay Company set up a facility to purchase and ship furs which were brought in by trappers. As with the French and the British, many of these trappers made friends with the Indians of the area and many took Indian wives.

Word of the abundance of the Oregon Territory spread and restless Easterners began to make the long and arduous journey to this new land. Most of the people who made the trip to Oregon joined other travelers in Independence or Liberty, Missouri. Unlike travelers of the past, these groups were made up of husbands, wives and children. The families who decided to make the journey West did so for a variety of reasons. Most sought free land or new business opportunities. One of the earliest of these families was the missionary couple Dr. Marcus Whitman and his wife Narcissa. They left Missouri in the spring of 1836. Narcissa kept a diary in which she detailed the journey. Word of these successful, though rugged, migrations filtered back to the restless folk of the East, encouraging more families to migrate.

The journeys West were not a way to escape poverty. Preparing for these trips was a relatively costly proposition. Families would need money enough for a wagon to carry possessions and provisions which would last for most of the journey, bedding, clothing and money for new supplies and emergencies. There were forts along the way where some things could be purchased, but for the most part, travelers had to carry their own resources. It was a very difficult trip but to those in search of free land or abundant hunting grounds or just plain adventure, it all seemed worthwhile.

Some people made the trip west for religious freedom. The Mormons, a religious sect founded by Joseph Smith in New York in 1830, were persecuted for their beliefs and forced to move. First they moved to Ohio then to Illinois and Missouri. They established a headquarters in Nauvoo, Illinois in the 1840's but were driven from there as well. In April of 1847, they began a trek to Council Bluffs, Iowa across present-day Nebraska and Wyoming, across the Rocky Mountains into what is now known as Utah. They settled beside the Great Salt Lake and finally were able to establish a permanent home. Over the years, about seventy thousand Mormons traveled west. In many ways they were like other emigrants. They shared the same trail experiences and followed the same routines. Their food, wagons, animals, sicknesses, triumphs and tragedies were typical. But in other ways, Mormons differed greatly from other pioneers. In addition to their quest for religious freedom, they moved west as "villages on wheels," working together to provide for the entire wagon train. They made trail improvements along the way to ease the journey for future travelers.

In 1807, Zebulon Pike was exploring the southwestern portion of the Louisiana Purchase for the U.S. Government. His party ventured into Mexican Territory, was captured and taken to Santa Fe. Relations between the United States and Mexico were not friendly. Mexico feared American expansion into their territory. The capture and imprisonment of Pike's party was meant to discourage any further ventures into the Spanish colony of Mexico. During his incarceration, Pike was able to observe the conditions in the village of tan adobe buildings surrounding a large dirt plaza which was shaded by a few cottonwood trees. There were few stores and in general, the town looked quite poor. A few government officials rode horses, but most of the

residents used burros or donkeys to carry the burdens. A few crude ox-drawn carts carried larger loads. In general, conditions in Santa Fe appeared to be primitive.

The Spanish governor suspected that Pike was a spy so he sent him and his company to Chihuahua, Mexico for further questioning. Along the five hundred mile trek, Pike observed an arduous route over deserts and other inhospitable territory. When he was finally released and allowed to return to Missouri, he shared his observations about the possibilities for trade opportunities. Most supplies to Santa Fe came from Chihuahua, a four month journey away or from the Caribbean port of Vera Cruz which was 1500 miles away. He speculated that supply caravans from Missouri would take less time and the travel conditions would be more favorable than the desert trek from Mexican ports to the south. Several traders attempted to take advantage of the chance for large profit but were met with hostility from Mexicans protecting their territory. It wasn't until Mexico's 1821 independence from Spain that trade from the north became a reality. William Becknell led a supply mission which arrived in Santa Fe in November of that year. He made a very large profit and hurried back to Missouri with the news that trade and settlers were welcome. The trip to Santa Fe was a difficult one, across deserts, over high mountain passes and through hostile Indian territory, but it was extremely lucrative. With their sizable profits, traders were able to purchase Spanish trade goods and gold and silver bullion to sell on their return trip to Missouri.

The first American woman to see New Mexico was Susan Magoffin, who accompanied her trader-husband to the territory in 1846. She kept a diary, which was later published, in which she described her surprise at the lack of formality in the dress of the women she met there. She was also startled by their openness and freedom of movement (such as, hiking a skirt in order to cross a stream.) In her journal she recorded the contrast between American and New Mexican women which were a reflection of the societies from which they came. Married American women had few legal rights, as her property and any wages she might earn belonged to her husband. A New Mexican woman, on the other hand, retained her property, wages and even her maiden name after marriage as was the custom among the original Spanish settlers. Unlike their American counterparts, New Mexican women were not subordinate to men.

Eventually more American women traveled the Santa Fe Trail as cooks, with their husbands who were traders, and as emigrants and settlers. Marion Russell was a child when she first journeyed along this route. Her mother was a cook for some of the soldiers who were part of a U.S.Army supply train headed for Ft. Union, New Mexico. The family eventually settled in Albuquerque where they took in boarders. Marion made several other trips over this trail which she later recorded in published memoirs. Other women came to New Mexico as army wives and wound up settling there. The U.S.Army presence in the territory was good for the economy and people scrambled for the opportunity to provide meals and lodging for the soldiers, as well as their horses. While it was men who were awarded the contracts to provide these services, women soon took over these jobs when their husbands died or abandoned them. Eventually, some women became ranchers or farmers, either with their husbands with their husbands or on their own. They brought with them the influences of Eastern living, but adopted many of the Spanish traditions which gave them more freedom and privileges.

African Americans participated in the shaping of the West from the time of European expansion. They came with Spanish as slaves in the early seventeenth century and remained with their owners in the settlements along the Rio Grande. There they intermingled with Indians and the Spanish, mixing blood lines in a variety of forms. Other Blacks made their way West from the South and the East. One was a man who accompanied the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Oregon Territory. His name was York and he was given his freedom when that expedition was over. He stayed in the Northwest among the Indians who had become his friends. It is

possible that he became a trapper. Some Black men found jobs in the West as hunters, trappers, guides, scouts and interpreters. Among the most famous was Jim Beckwourth who was born in Virginia, but spent his adult life in the Rocky Mountains doing a variety of jobs and living with some of the Indians who inhabited the area.

When the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished, many former slaves made their way West where land was cheap and attitudes toward African Americans were more accepting and open. Some families who had tried to eke out a living as sharecroppers in the South found life more rewarding when they didn't have to give a portion of their earnings to someone else. On the Plains of Kansas and Nebraska homesteaders were able to build houses out of sod, a compact system of roots and dirt which could be cut into bricks for building. Although life on the Plains was rigorous and lonely, those who stayed and stuck it out eventually prospered and were able to build a good life for themselves and their families. Some settlements, such as Nicodemus and Dunlap in Kansas were planned specifically for Black settlers. Though they had little with which to begin, by working together and sharing resources, the Exodusters (as they were called) were able to build farms and communities which flourished.

Some young Black men found opportunities in the West as ranch hands. As slaves, many had worked with cattle and horses, so their skills were valuable to the growing cattle business. One of the most famous of the Black Cowboys was Nat Love who had run off to Dodge City, Kansas when he was fifteen years old. His skills on horseback and with a lariat were legendary throughout the Great Plains, but with the advent of the railroad, Nat began a career as a Pullman porter, a more stable and secure occupation.

Also after the Civil War, men who had served in the armies were able to remain in reorganized units which were sent into the West to fight the fiercest of the Indian tribes, the Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Apache, Ute and Sioux. "It was the Indians who gave the Black troops the name Buffalo Soldiers because their hair resembled the shaggy coats of the buffalo. The buffalo was sacred to the Indians, and the men of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry accepted the name as a badge of honor, and the buffalo became a prominent part of their regimental crest." (1) After their service, many settled in this new territory to which they had become accustomed.

There were several African American women who left their mark in the West. There was "Stagecoach" Mary Fields who was born a slave but went to Montana where she began hauling freight and eventually drove a stagecoach as well as any man. Mary Ellen Pleasant was born into slavery in Georgia and went to California with her husband, a free Black man. In San Francisco, she and others filed a civil suit against a street car company which had refused to let them use the service because of their color. Long before Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Mary Ellen Pleasant won the right for people of color to ride on public transportation.

In 1862, the United States Congress passed the Homestead Act which allowed any U.S. citizen or immigrant to purchase 160 acres of land for \$18, if they would agree to farm the land for five years. For people who were poor, this seemed like dream come true. But life and farming were lonely and harsh on the Great Plains and nearly impossible in the high desert which lay to the west of the Plains. In addition, the land had been Indian hunting grounds for centuries. The concept of land ownership was foreign to the people who had inhabited the area prior to this era of Westward Expansion. Many struggles resulted from the differences in understanding. The U.S. government supported the rights of the new settlers to own this land and fought long and hard to drive the Indians from their traditional lands. While the white settlers were establishing homes and communities in the West, the lives of the Indians were disrupted and often destroyed. For them, it was the

most cruel period in the history of this country.

The homesteaders who moved into the Plains came from all over Europe as well as from the eastern United States. People from Russia settled towns in Kansas. Scandinavians moved into the Dakotas, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Some Irish settled in Montana. They often came in groups to provide support to one another. They came as families and these families shared the work and the struggle. Women stayed close to the homestead tending to children, livestock and kitchen gardens. Because of the distances between farms and the lack of transportation, they were often isolated from other women. Many kept diaries in which they described their hardships and triumphs. Others wrote letters to their families detailing their daily lives. Men did not suffer from loneliness as acutely because they had more mobility. They would travel to distant towns to sell their crops and purchase supplies. This afforded them the opportunity to socialize with other farmers while they conducted their business.

Plains women had difficult lives, trying to maintain clean, warm homes. They battled fierce winter storms, howling winds and springtime floods. They had to make most things from scratch, such as soap, brooms, candles and clothing. They raised sheep for wool and food, as well as pigs, chickens and turkeys. They planted vegetable gardens to provide for their families and then preserved what they could for the winter. Their work was endless and some women were not up to the challenge, but the majority were. They demonstrated an ability to survive and left a legacy of which is often unmatched today.

The period of Westward expansion was a very rich one in our nation's history. It was diverse in its people, its land and its struggles. After a review of the introductory material, teachers will be able to go in many directions. It is my intention to focus on three main areas: the routes which brought many of the settlers to the West; the women who made a name for themselves, as well as those unknowns who helped to build families, settlements and towns which molded the West that exists today; and the Indians who lived throughout the West and the lives that they lived. We will explore these areas to develop an understanding of the roles that women have played in the formation of this country. It is also my intention that there will emerge a greater appreciation for the lives and roles of our women ancestors as well as the women who shape our lives today.

LESSON ONE

THE TRAILS WEST

In this lesson, we will explore the various trails that settlers took West from Missouri. We will examine the reasons that people took these trails as well as the kind of people who made the journeys. We will examine the Oregon, the Mormon, the Santa Fe and the California Trails. We will begin this lesson by reading about the various trails to find the answers to initial questions (above). We will also look at the kinds of provisions that were necessary in order to make the journey.

The students will be divided into four groups. Using a United States map, each group will trace one of the trails and learn about the geography of the states through which that trail goes to get an idea of the challenges that were faced. The findings will be shared with the whole class so that they can compare and contrast the trails. The class can then compare these journeys with one that might be made today using interstate and other paved roads, snow tires, air conditioning and other conveniences of modern day travel.

A. The students will learn to identify and locate the following states and rivers and understand their significance.

- *Iowa *Platte River
- *Missouri *Columbia River
- *Kansas *Rio Grande
- *Nebraska *Independence Rock
- *Wyoming *Chimney Rock
- *Colorado *Great Salt Lake
- *Utah *Rocky Mountains
- *Idaho *Sierra Nevada Mountains
- *Oregon *Missouri River
- *Washington *Clearwater River
- *Nevada *Snake River
- *Illinois *Colorado River

B. The students will pay particular attention to the roles and responsibilities assumed by men, women and children. They will, through small and whole group discussions be able to identify specific tasks. We will compare these to modern tasks as well as those of people who lived in the East during the nineteenth century.

C. Students can build models of the kinds of transportation used or can create a relief map of the territory covered.

LESSON TWO

WOMEN OF THE WEST

In this part of the unit we will read about a variety of women who left their mark on the West. We will read about specific women as much as possible and about groups when the names of individuals are not known. We will examine their lives in terms of how they might have changed as a result of the Westward (or in some cases, northward) expansion.

A. Some of the women we will be studying are:

- “Stagecoach” Mary Fields
- Mary Ellen Pleasant
- Narcissa Whitman
- Sacajawea
- Henrietta Chamberlain King
- Zuni Pueblo women

Spanish women in Santa Fe
Plains Indian women
Marion Sloan Russell
Susan Shelby Magoffin
Esther Morris Slack
Amanda Burks
Louisa Wade Wetherill
Homesteader from Kansas, Nebraska or Oklahoma

B. Students will work in groups of no more than three people to discover the specifics of these women's lives. Included in their research will be an exploration of the following:

What did they eat and where did they get their food? What kind of clothing did they wear (for warmth, to keep cool)? Where or how did they get the materials to make their clothing? In what kind of homes did they live (adobe, sod, log, tipis, etc.)? How children were educated (if they were)? What did women in particular do for recreation?

C. Students will use the materials found in their research to write a description of the lives of these women or to create a replica of the home they have studied and its environment.

LESSON THREE

INDIAN WOMEN OF THE WEST

There is little written information about the lives of Indians and especially Indian women during the period of westward expansion because Indians did not have a written language. Most of the information that is available has been gathered by anthropologists or gleaned from the diaries and journals of those who encountered Indians in their travels. Some Indians were friendly and helpful, others were less so. Some lived in established villages, others were nomadic.

The purpose of this lesson is to help the students “discover” that the West was inhabited by many different groups of Indians who lived in various parts of the West. They will examine the various regions of this area and identify them. Specifically we will be identifying the tribes from:

the Northwest (the Cayuse, the Nez Perce, the Haida, the Kwakwaka'wakw, the Blackfoot, the Shoshone.)
the Great Plains (the Pawnee, the Cheyenne, the Kiowa, the Arapahoe, the Comanche, the Mandan, the Wichita.)
California (the Pomo, the Wintun, the Salinan, the Costanoan.)
the Southwest (the Navajo, the Hopi, the Apache, the Rio Grande Pueblo tribes, the Zuni.)

We will use a series of books published by Children’s Press which focus on the specific tribes. While these books deal with modern life in the various tribes, they also provide some background on the history of the tribes. We will examine whether they lived in established villages or were nomads. Specifically, we will try to discover the roles, rights and responsibilities of women and how they compare with those of the other women who moved into the West.

We will also read the story of a child who was kidnapped by Indians. The book will be either *Indian Captive: the story of Mary Jemison* by Lois Lenski or *Indian Annie: Kiowa captive* by Alice Marriott (most likely the latter since the events occurred in the West.) We will discuss the book to discover how women are depicted and what their roles were. The students will be asked to write a critique of the book discussing the parts they liked, as well as those that they did not like. Students will be asked to share and defend their points of view.

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