

**FOOD AND FRIENDSHIP:
MEALS AND SOCIAL INTERACTION BETWEEN WOMEN
ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL**

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During the mid to late 19th century, many people traveled across the unsettled plains of the American West to pursue a new life. Some went for gold, some for land, and some just went in the spirit of adventure. The paths that they chose were numerous. Some went to California and others to Colorado. Some traveled Platte River Road which “followed the Platte River from the Missouri River through Nebraska to western Wyoming.”¹ Whatever their path or purpose, these pioneers were seeking out the vast area for a new home. Among these people were women, many of whom were wives of men seeking the new life, just along for the trip. Along the way these women had to maintain a sense of home in an unfamiliar setting. As part of any home, food and cooking were important aspects that women needed to attend to as part of their sphere of influence. Women asserted their control over their lives and families with activities like cooking.²

Women sought companionship with other women to feel at home out on the open road, and cooking was a communal, as well as a necessary function, among groups of traveling women. Women critically needed other female companions for many other reasons as well. Even things as simple as privacy for dressing and bodily functions were difficult to accomplish without another woman to be a shield.³ But friendship also helped women make the trail seem more like home. There is a correlation between food and social relationships. Women needed both, and sometimes they were one in the same, though the two needs were not mutually exclusive. Women might find companionship or social interaction because of food. Sharing of food among members of a wagon train made meals a sort of social institution.

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¹ Rosemary Gunderson Palmer, *Children's Voices from the Trail: Narratives of the Platte River Road* (Spokane, WA: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 2002), 28.

² Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell, “Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867,” *Feminist Studies* 2 (1975), 152.

³ Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 98.

Women's companionship and their interactions in food preparation were central to their survival on the overland journey, both physically and psychologically. Women were often put into a difficult situation by leaving all that they knew and traveling to an unknown land to start a home over again. Some women had yet to start a family, while others were with child when they left on their journey. Most of the time, childbearing had no affect on whether or not a husband and wife would decide to leave.⁴ Because of this, strong social ties to other members of their traveling party were important. Women needed to feel that they could count on other women to help in their time of need, whether for childbirth, extra food, or loneliness.

The experiences of two women analyzed in this work are Catherine Haun and Ellen Tootle. Catherine and Ellen made the overland journey and experienced these needs. Both spoke of receiving help from others in regards to food and both spend much time discussing food and cooking. Haun also discusses her interactions with other women, showing the importance of such activities, which were the basis of their socialization and the focus of the efforts to make the trail more hospitable.

Social ties were very important to women on the Overland Trail. By embarking on the journey, their entire social world was thrown upside down. Women left behind their social network, including family and friends. This could be very distressing, causing some women to become apprehensive when starting out on the trip. Catherine Haun wrote in her 1849 journal that “a strange feeling of fear” overcame her on the outset and she was “almost dazed with dread.”⁵ One woman even gave the advice, “If you own a home and are comfortably fixed stay with it and let the other fellow do the traveling.”⁶ But not all women were “trudging mournfully after the wagons,”⁷ dreading the very thought of leaving home. Even Haun was able to hide her fears from her husband and continue on without incident.⁸ Many women were excited at the prospect of a new life just as much as their husbands. But one thing that was critical was the availability of a social group of women.

Women on the trails needed the support of other women. Often the wagon trains consisted of groups of kin or friends that

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵ Diary of Catherine Haun (1849) in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 169.

⁶ Mary Jane Long quoted in Sharon Brown, “What the Covered Wagon Covered,” *Overland Journal* 4 (Summer 1986), 34.

⁷ Sandra L. Myres, *Westerning Women and the Frontier Experience* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 99.

⁸ Catherine Haun, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 169.

formed a large caravan.⁹ The women from these groups bonded over the daily chores that they had to perform. Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell note in their article, “Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867” that women and men faced the same struggles and circumstances, but the women were not as included in the cultural make-up of the time and therefore had no defined role to make sense of the suffering.¹⁰ Hence, the commiseration of women with each other during western migration lightened the “depressing necessity” of daily chores, including some that would have been considered “men’s work.”¹¹

The notion of women doing men’s work is interesting, for at this time period, men and women had very distinct, “separate spheres.” Jeanne H. Watson made the observation in her article “Traveling Traditions: Victorians on the Overland Trails” that this “separate spheres” idea was not always applicable to pioneer families because men depended on women to work with them side-by-side to develop and build up a successful home on the trail and on their new homesteads.¹² These jobs could include “cooking out of doors, driving the oxen, collecting buffalo chips and weeds, helping to pitch the tent, [and] washing on river banks.”¹³ Watson does point to a blending of ideals that allowed women to do necessary, difficult jobs and still maintain a Victorian lifestyle of propriety.¹⁴ The particular chores listed above, for example, are more domestic aspects of traveling, which are divided from jobs a man might do.¹⁵

Women often worked together, performing daily tasks as a group. From one account, “Often washdays became a community affair.”¹⁶ Women also helped each other out among the wagon trains. The travel was taxing and possibly exhausting. Everyday chores and activities were not as easy and monotonous when being performed in a covered wagon on the way to a new home out west. Childbirth and sickness were particularly difficult. Women would work together to help other women out when these situations came up, even visiting other wagon trains on horseback when they heard of someone needing help.¹⁷ The diary of Lydia Allen Rudd is full of stories of sickness and death. In one specific instance, she told of a man who became very ill

⁹ Faragher and Stansell, “Women and Their Families,” 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 77-78.

¹² Jeanne H. Watson, “Traveling Traditions: Victorians on the Overland Trails,” *Journal of the West* 33 (1994), 75.

¹³ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 36.

¹⁴ Watson, “Traveling Traditions,” 75.

¹⁵ Brown, “What the Covered Wagon Covered,” 32.

¹⁶ Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, 126.

¹⁷ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 78.

on the trail. According to Rudd, “We doctored him what we could but he was to [sic] far gone.”¹⁸ Jane Gould Tortillott wrote in her diary, “We called to see a woman who had a sick husband. They are emigrants. Have only been here a week, are waiting for him to recover. He has the typhoid fever.”¹⁹ Women were able to provide support in this way for ill and struggling families.

Women gave each other moral support as well. Families were the main social unit on the trail.²⁰ But women needed companionship outside the family. It was typical for wagon trains to get together and visit during the evenings after a long day of travel. Often music accompanied these evenings; “After the singing and dancing, people generally gathered in groups to talk awhile. Imagine the whole population of a small town assembled in an area less than a block square and you get the idea.”²¹ Inevitably, the women and men divided themselves into groups. Women talked about their hardships or did work in groups instead of joining the men.²²

During the day, women visited as well. They walked together, or possibly took a small side trip together as the journey wore on.²³ Women called on each other to “exchange news, information, advice, and recipes as well as sunbonnet patterns.”²⁴ They visited with other women and participated in activities such as knitting and sewing.²⁵ Women enjoyed the company of other adult women, sometimes without their children around. Flora Bender recalled that her mother did not include her daughters when she went calling, but did when it was time to do the washing and go to church.²⁶ Rebecca Woodson, a young mother, became friends with the oldest girls from a family of ten children, stating “Oh those happy days” about her time with these new friends.²⁷ Women enjoyed the times

¹⁸ Diary of Lydia Allen Rudd in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 190.

¹⁹ Diary of Jane Gould Tortillott in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 227-228.

²⁰ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 31.

²¹ B.J. Zenor, “By Covered Wagon to the Promised Land,” *American West* 11 (1974), 38.

²² Faragher and Stansell, “Women and Their Families,” 158.

²³ Rosemary Gunderson Palmer, *Children’s Voices from the Trail: Narratives of the Platte River Road* (Spokane, WA: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 2002), 172.

²⁴ Watson, “Traveling Traditions,” 75.

²⁵ Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, 133.

²⁶ Palmer, *Children’s Voices from the Trail*, 116.

²⁷ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 67.

when they “visited, cooked together, or went swimming” and felt frustrated when they were unable to socialize with other women.²⁸

The bonds between women traveling the trails were so strong that when troubles arose among members of different wagon trains, the women were struck with the fear of being separated. Friendships were “strikingly intimate and deep” and losing these would have been heartbreaking to the women.²⁹ Wagon trains often reached an impasse at certain points of the trail, and some decided to part ways. When wagon trains broke down, women might be left without any other females to socialize with.³⁰ Fights were recorded in many women’s journals because a fight might mean separation from the company of women in another wagon train.³¹ After such a separation, women became preoccupied with looking out for a new wagon train with women in it.³² This shows how important women’s relationships with each other were. The journey itself took women out of their comfort zones of friends and family and put them in a situation possibly void of this comfort.³³ Women found comfort among other women on the trail, and when it was again taken from them, it was very detrimental. For women to survive they needed friendship and community like they experienced in their homes back east before they headed out.

Along with companionship, food was one of the overarching components that bonded women together on the trail. Deciding how much food to take and how to cook it while traveling were of utmost importance. Women, alone or together, were usually the cooks, as cooking was part of the normal field of work for women. Women were in charge of keeping life as normal as possible, and meals were possibly the largest part of this normality.³⁴ Meals could be considered the biggest social institution on the trail because it brought people together and was sometimes a social event as well as a necessity for living.

Before embarking on the trip west, one of the most important things to consider was how much and what kinds of food to bring. People looked to others that had already successfully completed the

journey for information about what to bring. Joel Palmer wrote what to bring in his journal:

For each adult there should be two hundred pounds of flour, thirty pounds of pilot bread, seventy-five pounds of bacon, ten pounds of rice, five pounds of coffee, two pounds of tea, twenty-five pounds of sugar, half a bushel of dried beans, one bushel of dried fruit, two pounds of saleratus, ten pounds of salt, half a bushel of corn meal; and it is well to have half a bushel of corn, parched and ground; a small keg of vinegar should also be taken. To the above may be added as many good things as the means of the person will enable him to carry.³⁵

This is a very long list. However, it would be better to have more than enough than not enough. Some groups, toward the end of the trip, barely scraped enough to survive on. One man had to live on frogs and roseberries to survive.³⁶

Food showed up regularly in overland diaries. Some women would write down every day what they cooked and ate, relating what they did and what their problems were.³⁷ Cooking outdoors with different utensils and over an open fire changed the way many women had to cook. Weather, insects, dust, and many other mitigating circumstances affected individual and group experiences.³⁸ Margaret White Chambers, a young woman traveling with her husband and his team, had to cook for the entire company at only eighteen years old. She was faced with this difficulty of cooking outdoors with questionable fuel sources.³⁹ The most questionable of these fuel sources was buffalo chips. Buffalo chips were the droppings left behind by buffalo along the trail. These provided a useful source of fuel to cook with, although not palatable to most travelers. References to buffalo chips are found in many journals. Their presence or absence was important enough to mention in the daily accounts.⁴⁰ Buffalo chips were a last resort to many groups, used when grass and weeds ran out in the dusty deserts out west.⁴¹

There are many anecdotes relating to the gathering and use of buffalo chips. Everyone, including children, had to participate in collecting buffalo chips because their survival depended on it. Children occasionally formed some kind of competition to make the job less

²⁸ Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 41.

²⁹ Faragher and Stansell, “Women and their Families,” 152-153.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

³¹ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 89.

³² John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 137.

³³ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁴ Susan Armitage, “Women and Men in Western History: A Stereotypical Vision,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 16 (October, 1985), 384.

³⁵ Joel Palmer quoted in Kathryn Troxel, “Food of the Overland Emigrants,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 56 (1955), 14.

³⁶ Troxel, “Food of the Overland Emigrants,” 24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸ Brown, “What the Covered Wagon Covered,” 35.

³⁹ Troxel, “Food of the Overland Emigrants,” 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

tedious and disgusting.⁴² Some wagon trains would laugh at each other while collecting chips to make it less unpleasant.⁴³ Women especially found the job unpleasant. Henry Hazard, an eight year old boy, recalled: “The ladies in the train started on a fast immediately after we got onto the Platte—the fuel was not the proper kind. After we had been there about a week, however, they got *grandly* over that.”⁴⁴ Sarah J. Cummins told another amusing story about women and buffalo chips, recalling “All along this part of the road there was a great scarcity of wood and many times we were compelled to cook our food with buffalo chips. This caused many ladies to act very cross and many were the rude phrases uttered, far more humiliating to refined ears than any mention of the material used for fuel could have been.”⁴⁵ The indelicacy of these women’s actions dwarfed the indelicacy of the actual buffalo chips. But these times added to the social institution of meals, because to create a meal, people had to work together to even start a fire.

All women faced these problems, but not all of them had to face them alone like Margaret Chambers. Women would sometimes collaborate on meals for the whole wagon train. For a special occasion, women might prepare a large meal together.⁴⁶ Women also helped each other cook when a crisis occurred. Ruth Schackelford witnessed her friend suffer a “terrible accident” when one of her horses upset her raising bread. Mrs. Schackelford shared what she had prepared with her neighbor and they all had a nice meal.⁴⁷ This adds another aspect to women needing the company of other women while on the overland trail. To be able to help out or just commiserate with another woman about cooking under these unpredictable circumstances was important to the social order of women.

Catherine Haun and Ellen Tootle had very different traveling experiences, but many aspects regarding food and friendship were the same. There are many mentions of food and companionship in each of the diaries. These diaries stress the importance of food especially, but also socialization and working together as well. Both women mention food and cooking many times, sometimes in the context of working, but also sometimes as just a particular enjoyment of an otherwise

⁴² Ruth Barnes Moynihan, “Children and Young People on the Overland Trail,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 6 (July, 1975), 284.

⁴³ Troxel, “Food of the Overland Emigrants,” 18.

⁴⁴ Henry Hazard quoted in Jeanne H. Watson, “Women’s Travails and Triumphs on the Overland Trails,” 29.

⁴⁵ Sarah J. Cummins quoted in Brown, “What the Covered Wagon Covered,” 35.

⁴⁶ Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, 123.

⁴⁷ Brown, “What the Covered Wagon Covered,” 35.

bland day. Through their diaries, evidence of the social institution of mealtimes can be seen.

Catherine Haun and her husband left Iowa in 1849 to follow the gold rush.⁴⁸ Haun wrote her account of her travels many years later, so it is not the typical day to day diary that many emigrants left. Nevertheless, Haun’s account was very well written and provides very specific information about her trip. One of the first things she mentioned in her journal was a list of all the provisions they brought. Flour, bacon, alcohol, dried meats, fruits, and vegetables were all brought, as well as luxuries which consisted of “a gallon each of wild plum and crabapple preserves and blackberry jam.”⁴⁹ Not all wagon trains could afford the space to bring such luxuries, but Haun’s wagon train was “large, well equipped, and experienced.”⁵⁰ That she would mention this list of provisions shows how important it was to know how much food was brought.

Another reference to food in Haun’s diary is the fact that their wagon train employed a cook. Unfortunately, that did not last long, as Haun described “In the morning our first domestic annoyance occurred. The woman cook refused point blank to go any further.”⁵¹ This was particularly distressing to Haun because she did not know how to cook. According to Haun, “I surprised myself by proposing to do the cooking...having been reared in a slave state my culinary education had been neglected and I had yet to make my first cup of coffee.”⁵² Luckily, it seems as though Catherine was able to get along fine without a cook, although pancakes were not her specialty.⁵³

Haun made several more references to food, mainly when the food was something special. Haun enjoyed the times when their wagon train could get delicacies such as milk. One of the members of the wagon train had cows for most of the trip, so when butter or buttermilk was made, “We all were glad to swap some of our food for a portion of these delicacies.”⁵⁴ Milk was not always easy to come by, so to have someone with cows in the wagon train would have been quite a boon to the rest of the travelers. Haun also mentioned Christmas dinner. She and her husband had made it to California, but were still living in a tent. Her Christmas dinner was as follows: “a

⁴⁸ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 165.

⁴⁹ Diary of Catherine Haun in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 167.

⁵⁰ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 165.

⁵¹ Diary of Catherine Haun in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 169.

⁵² Diary of Catherine Haun in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 169.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

grizzly bear steak for which we paid \$2.50, one cabbage for \$1.00 and —oh horrors—some *more* dried apples.”⁵⁵

Besides food, Haun also mentioned of how she spent some of her time and the social connections she made on the trails. She very much enjoyed the group of people she was traveling with—“a wonderful collection of many people with as many different dispositions and characteristics, all recognizing their mutual dependence upon each other and bound together by the single aim of ‘getting to California.’”⁵⁶ Haun recognized the need for other people during the trip. She also wrote about the other women in the wagon train and what they did together during the long traveling days. They visited other wagons, took walks, did needlework, and swapped food and recipes to keep themselves busy. Haun apparently had a vibrant social network and enjoyed the company of the other ladies she was traveling with.⁵⁷

The diary of Ellen Tootle offers a somewhat different perspective of the westward journey. Tootle left on her journey with her husband in 1862 to the mines in Colorado.⁵⁸ Tootle has a different writing style than Catherine Haun, as her diary was written in a day to day style, rather than all at once at the end of the journey. Ellen Tootle has several references to food and cooking as well. Although she does not mention as much about social relationships with other women, there is mention of other people and how they provided help with food.

Ellen Tootle’s journey began in Plattsburgh, NY, which was the starting off point for the trip to Colorado. She and her husband remained there for several days before they began the actual trip. Tootle did not begin her diary with a list of provisions brought, as other overland diaries. She did, however, usually write what they ate every day. Like Catherine Haun, Tootle was not an accomplished cook when she undertook the journey with her husband. There are several humorous anecdotes related to Tootle’s supposed lack of cooking ability and clumsiness around the kitchen. In one such story she wrote: “Mr. Tootle says I cannot do anything but talk, so would not trust me to make the coffee. Boasted very much of his experience. He decided to make it himself.”⁵⁹ Mr. Tootle proved himself to be not much of a cook when the coffee turned out wrong, but he claimed she had not given him proper instructions.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁵⁸ Kenneth L. Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, vol. 8, 1862-1865 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 59.

⁵⁹ Diary of Ellen Tootle in Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, 63.

Mr. Tootle also bemoaned his wife’s experience in the kitchen when the following mishap happened: “The first day, the cork came out of the whiskey bottle and spilled more than half to Mr. Tootle’s great disappointment. Indeed I don’t believe he has recovered from it yet.” Fortunately for them, Mrs. Tootle was able to make fine coffee and cook a good dinner, although she was very nervous about trying.⁶⁰

These small anecdotes show just how important food and cooking were on the trail. Besides needing sustenance, meals provided enjoyment, and if they were not prepared well, there would be no enjoyment. Tootle also got enjoyment out of specific kinds of food that were not always available. Canned peaches, milk, buttermilk, and the occasional piece of cake while visiting a town were very enjoyable and very much appreciated. Most of the time, they got these special foods from other people, whether fellow travelers or people living in the towns. The first night of their trip they arrived at their campsite very late and only because a fellow traveling partner gave them some rhubarb pie did they get dinner. They also received milk and cake from a lady at a stage office on their way west.⁶¹

These two diaries give different stories of westward journeys, but have similar references to food and companionship. There are also some other similarities between the two journals. First, both Catherine Haun and Ellen Tootle were young brides traveling with their husbands and no children. Both women did not have children until later in their lives. It is not clear when Catherine Haun had children or how many she had, but we do know that she dictated her journal to her daughter later in her life, so she did have children at some point. Ellen Tootle had at least three children, one of which died in infancy.⁶² Also, both women place a significant importance on food. How much and what types of food they brought and ate feature prominently in both journals.

These two accounts, however, are very different. There is a thirteen year time difference between when Catherine Haun and Ellen Tootle left on their journeys. Haun was traveling to California while Tootle was going to Colorado. Catherine specifically mentions other women and the activities that they pursued together. It is not clear how many other women traveled with Ellen. She only mentioned another woman once, the wife of her husband’s partner, but she never mentioned her again, and this other woman may not have even been on the journey with them. The only other person really mentioned in Tootle’s journal is her husband, so whether other women were even on the trip or not is not known. Despite the differences in accounts,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 64.

⁶¹ Ibid., 68-71.

⁶² Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, 60.

Catherine Haun and Ellen Tootle's overland diaries show the importance of food and relationships and how they were sometimes intertwined on their trips to the future Western United States.

Overall, food and friendship were both very important to the overland emigrant women. The absence of these elements would cause problems for the women and their wagon trains. To quote Kathryn Troxel's article, "Food of the Overland Emigrants": "Many of the emigrants...traveled in groups for reasons of safety, mostly, but often simply because a large family with their friends were attracted at the same time by the golden promise of the West."⁶³ They also traveled together to maintain social ties that gave women a sense of home and to share in relationships that were necessary for women's survival. Catherine Haun wrote: "Upon the whole I enjoyed the trip, spite of its hardships and the fear and dread that hung as a pall over every hour."⁶⁴ Maybe this enjoyment came from the food and friendship that she experienced while on the dangerous trip.

⁶³ Troxel, "Food of the Overland Emigrants," 15-16.

⁶⁴ Diary of Catherine Haun in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 185.