

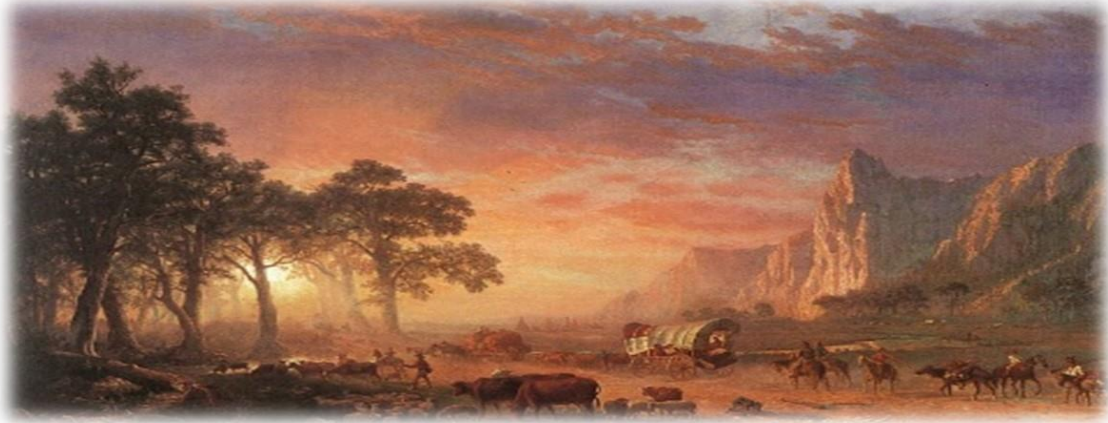
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Book Notes #182

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

**Women's Suffrage (Part Two):
Pioneer Women**



“The Oregon Trail” Albert Bierstadt

In our current political climate, it probably can't happen, but if Americans decide to add another national holiday to the calendar my candidate is August 26. Two reasons support my nomination.



First, the trivial: August is the only month without a major national holiday. Second, more importantly, August 26 is Women's Equality Day.

As paradoxical as it might seem in 2024 with a woman as one of the two major parties' nominees for president of the United States, many people, men *and* women, need to be reminded that women are co-equal partners in the great American experiment of self-government – “government of the people, by the people, for the people” now under assault by wannabe theocratic authoritarians.

As surprising as it might be that in 2024 women's rights are questioned, as we discovered last week in [“Women's Suffrage: Part One: The Anti-Suffragists,”](#) people are also surprised to learn that among the earliest anti-suffragists the most serious were women. Similarly, they are sometimes equally surprised to

learn that the first states to grant women the vote weren't eastern, allegedly progressive states, like Massachusetts or New York but, instead, the newly formed western states of the Rocky Mountains and West Coast.

When I give talks about *The American Tapestry Project* (the podcast version of which can be found at WQLN/NPR's website [here](#) and Spotify, Apple and all the major podcast sites) and one of the tapestry's subtopics, "The Birth of the Women's Movement," and I ask audiences why women first got the vote in the new western states, I get two answers.

Both are correct.

First, contrary to many people's first reaction that the eastern states, in particular New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, are and were hotbeds of progressivism, which is partially accurate, they were also inherently conservative on social issues, the examples of temperance and abolitionism notwithstanding. In addition to the southern states that became the Confederacy, they were also staunchly embedded in the values of the Cult of Domesticity, or, as it is sometimes called, the Cult of True Womanhood. Without knowing all the details, audiences seem to understand that the quest for women's suffrage in these states was a bitter contest.

The second answer I get is almost always – *pioneer women*.

And those who make that claim are essentially correct.



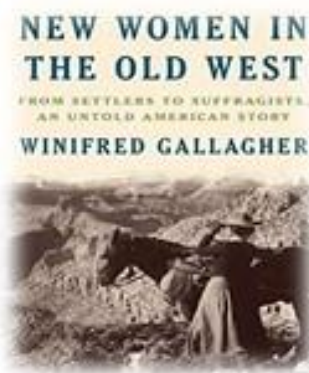
While different from their eastern counterpart “New Women” we met in Part One, pioneer women, by the very lives they lived, made a mockery of male claims that women were weak and needed men’s protection. After traversing the Oregon Trail, they homesteaded, made homes out of what were essentially shacks and cabins, planted and harvested crops, could, if necessary, handle a gun as well as a man – some

were even better – consider Annie Oakley – yes, there really was an Annie Oakley – whom the great Sioux Chief Sitting Bull called “little miss sure shot.”

But that wasn’t all.

Pioneer women did all the other backbreaking work that made up a woman’s day – cooking, cleaning, making and repairing clothes, and birthing children.

No one was going to tell them they were too weak or not intelligent enough to vote, although some tried.



In a marvelous book, *New Women In the Old West: From Settlers to Suffragists, An Untold American Story*, Winifred Gallagher surveys the story of the “winning of the west” by both men *and* women. [1] Although the book suffers from trying to tell too much in too short a space (the blizzard of mini biographies can at times bewilder), Gallagher brilliantly tells the stories of the women who won the West as she explodes three myths: the myth of female frailty, the myth that women can’t lead, and the myth of the “cowboy” built America. Along the way, she provides a nice summary of the entire scope of the

women’s suffrage movement and the 19th century phenomenon of the “New Woman.”

The myth of female frailty, a key if contradictory tenet of the Cult of Domesticity, asserted that women were weaker and less intelligent than men. They needed to be coddled to protect their reproductive capacity and to shield them from life's rough edges. Among many, Gallagher's stories of women like Sarah Cummins, who traversed the Oregon Trail in 1845; Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, one of the two first white women to cross the Rocky Mountains; and Mina Westbye, the 21-year-old Norwegian immigrant who homesteaded the North Dakota prairie **alone** demolished any notion that a woman was a frail vessel needing man's protection.

Not only did they do all the work men did, often it was their "settler production," homemade products such as homespun cloth and preserved foodstuffs they created and sold to other homesteaders, that fed a struggling pioneer family during the years before a new farm produced a subsistence. [2] In the booming mine towns and new settler communities, other women like Luzerna Stanley Wilson saw opportunity in the absence of hotels or restaurants (a modern creation) and created boarding houses and saloons catering to the vast population of single men. Running their own businesses, like their eastern counterparts, they fought for the legal right to their own earnings. [3]

Other pioneer women with looser notions of propriety – the archetypal "sporting women" and "soiled doves" of Victorian euphemism – built businesses serving the legions of single men's more elemental needs. They were the originals of the classic western "Gunsmoke's" Miss Kitty. I often wondered what parents told their children sitting in the family room watching TV what Miss Kitty really did and where "her girls" taking men up the saloon's stairs were going and to do what.

Still other women more firmly grounded in Victorian values, like California's Sarah Royce, demonstrated women's leadership talents by building communities centered on home, church, and school. In western lore, they became known as "town mothers." [4] Surviving an almost tragic wagon train accident while heading west with her prospector husband in 1849 because she could not find a school for her children, she created one in her own home. When thwarted by men who didn't understand what she was doing, she became a powerful agent for women's rights. For the more bookish among you, her name may sound

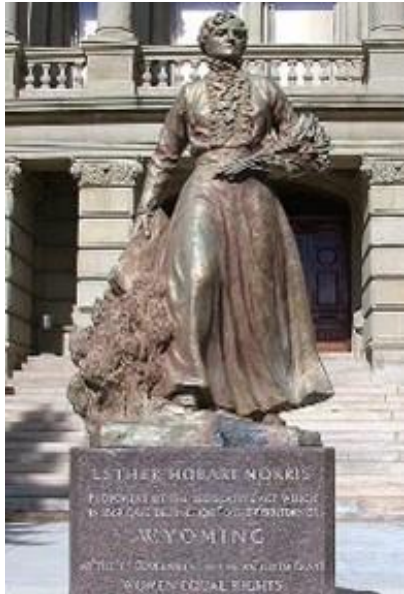
familiar because her son, Josiah Royce, became one of the leading American philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and was a colleague of Georges Santayana and William James at Harvard.

Most Americans, when they think of the “winning of the West,” conjure images of “mountain men” like Jim Bridger and Jeremiah Johnson, or images of long cattle drives up the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Kansas, or of gunfights in the streets of Deadwood in the Dakotas. All of which really happened, but all of which were only a minor part of the “winning of the West.” In terms of time, those days lasted only from roughly 1868 to 1888. The mythic West was created by pop novelists like Ned Buntline and Bat Masterson (who, for Wyatt Earp fans, really did exist) and, of course, by the pop culture icon William F. Cody’s “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.” If, as is sometimes said, sportswriters can create “a mountain of prose out of a tissue of facts,” similarly Buntline, Masterson, “Buffalo Bill,” and later Louis L’Amour created a mattress of western myth out of a tissue of facts.

The real winning of the West was done by women and men together homesteading, farming, and building communities. Their story, with all its pain, promise, and ultimate redemption was masterfully told in the stories and novels of Willa Cather. In novels like *My Antonia*, telling the story of Nebraskan Antonia Shimenda, and *O Pioneers*, the story of the entrepreneurial Alexandra Bergson, Cather brought to life those who “personified the western women who became more equal by achieving as much if not more than many men.” [5]

What were the first states (or territories) to grant women the vote?

To the surprise of some, Wyoming was first when, still a territory, in 1869 it granted women the vote; when it became a state in 1890, women retained their rights, including the right to vote.



A key figure in making that happen was Esther Hobart Morris – often called the “Mother of Woman Suffrage.” Morris herself never took credit for passage of Wyoming’s suffrage bill – giving it to William Bright, one of the future-oriented males of the era. [8] More importantly, Morris was the first woman in American history to hold a judicial office, serving as justice of the peace in South Pass City, Wyoming. The inscription on the statue in the photo at left, which stands outside the Wyoming State Capitol, reads: “Esther Hobart Morris Proponent of the Legislative Act Which in 1869 Gave Distinction to the Territory of Wyoming as the 1st Government in the World to Grant Women Equal Rights.”

In 1870, Utah became the second territory to grant women the right to vote, influenced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' progressive views on women's roles. Aimed at curbing Mormon political power, this right was revoked in 1887 by the Edmunds-Tucker Act.

Intertwined with the fight against polygamy and federal attempts to control Utah's governance, women's suffrage was a contentious issue. Mormon women had more power and rights than other women, but their polygamous marriages confused non-Mormons. Mormons wanted women to have the right to vote to demonstrate that they weren't mere chattel or sexual objects, but free and powerful voices in their complex domestic arrangements. Their efforts culminated in the state's restoration of women's voting rights in 1895.

In Washington Territory, women's suffrage made notable progress in 1883 when the territorial legislature granted women the right to vote. Citing legal technicalities, the Washington Supreme Court overturned this law in 1887. Suffragists continued their efforts, driven by activists like Emma Smith DeVoe and May Arkwright Hutton. In 1910, they succeeded when Washington became the fifth state to enfranchise women.



In Colorado, the women's suffrage movement gained momentum in the late 19th century. A first effort, led by Susan B. Anthony and others, failed in 1877. Supported by local leaders such as Clara Cressingham and Ellis Meredith, the Colorado Non-Partisan Equal Suffrage Association continued the fight. It focused on grassroots organizing and engaging men to support the cause.

In 1893, Colorado women's efforts met success when Colorado became the first state to grant women the right to vote through a popular referendum. That is, men voted for it since they were the only ones who could vote! This historic victory, achieved through relentless campaigning and strategic advocacy, set a precedent for other states. Carrie Chapman Catt learned their tactics and used them as the 19th century turned into the 20th.

The image above is of the "Pioneer Mothers of Colorado" statue; it sits outside the state capitol in Denver. Note the rifle on one arm and the baby on the other. You tell her she can't vote.



Who was Carrie Chapman Catt? One of Susan B. Anthony's metaphorical "nieces" who helped Anthony in her work, the strategically brilliant Carrie Chapman Catt played a pivotal role in securing the women's right to vote.

Born the daughter of pioneers in 1859, Carrie Clinton Lane demonstrated intelligence and a fierce determination to succeed. Her early life was marked by academic excellence. She graduated from Iowa State Agricultural College (now Iowa State University) in 1880. She was the only woman in her class.

After teaching for a few years, she became one of the first female school superintendents in the United States. In 1885, she married Leo Chapman, a newspaper editor. Tragically, he died of typhoid fever within a year of their marriage, leaving her widowed and alone. Pursuing a career in journalism, a rare field for women at the time, she moved to San Francisco, where she became a leader in the California suffrage movement. Her commitment intensified after her marriage to George Catt, an engineer who supported her activism both financially and emotionally. By 1890, she had become a national figure in the movement, working closely with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

In 1892, Anthony asked her to address Congress about the women's suffrage amendment. In 1893, she was a key figure in Colorado's successful campaign to win women the vote. Emulating her mentor Anthony, who would go anywhere and speak to anyone in pursuit of women's rights, Catt traveled over a thousand miles throughout the Rockies visiting 29 of Colorado's 63 counties supporting Colorado women's right to vote. [7]

In 1900, when Catt succeeded Anthony as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, her leadership style marked a new era of strategic and focused activism. She recognized the need for a coordinated, nationwide approach and devised what became known as the "Winning Plan" in 1916. She focused on both states and the federal government. She built coalitions of supporters and developed sophisticated public relations campaigns. A seasoned manager, Catt strengthened the national association's organizational structure. She established a national office to coordinate efforts, distribute materials, and provide guidance to state and local chapters.

Catt's work extended beyond suffrage.

She was a committed pacifist, founding the Women's Peace Party in 1915 and, in 1920, she transformed the National American Woman Suffrage Association into the League of Women Voters after passage of the 19th Amendment. The League aimed to educate women on their new civic responsibilities and to promote active participation in public affairs.

Despite her achievements, Catt's legacy is not without controversy. She faced criticism for some of her nativist anti-immigrant statements, her racially insensitive remarks, and her strategy to sometimes exclude African American women from suffrage efforts to gain broader support in southern states. In her later years, she sought to correct her errors, but they remain a stain on her legacy. However, her overall contributions to women's rights remain undeniable.

After Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado, the women's suffrage movement in Idaho saw significant progress in the late 19th century. Initially inspired by the broader national movement, local activists, including Clara Campbell and Abigail Scott Duniway from neighboring Oregon, spearheaded the efforts. Following Duniway's lead, the Idaho Equal Suffrage Association mobilized support across the state, leveraging public speeches, newspapers, and local gatherings to persuade voters. In 1896, Idaho became the fourth state to grant women the right to vote.



Who was Abigail Scott Duniway? A women's rights advocate, a suffragist, and an author renowned for her relentless work in the Pacific Northwest, Abigail Scott Duniway was born in 1834 in Groveland, Illinois, the second of 12 children. Her pioneer parents, John Tucker Scott and Anne Roelofson, valued education and hard work, principles that characterized Abigail's later life and work.

In 1852, the Scott family embarked on a demanding journey to Oregon along the Oregon Trail. The grueling trip, marked by the death of Abigail's mother and her own marriage to Benjamin Charles Duniway, profoundly shaped her views on women's rights and the hardships they faced. At

only 18, she assumed major family responsibilities, gaining firsthand experience of the physical and emotional tolls of a pioneer woman's life.

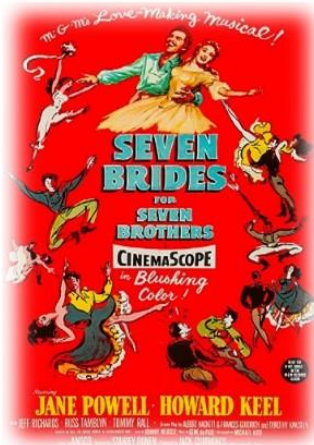
Settling in Lafayette, Oregon, Duniway began her career as an educator, teaching at a local school. She also became a writer, a skill that later defined her advocacy work. Tragedy struck in 1862 when her husband Benjamin suffered a severe injury that left him unable to work. Duniway became the family's primary breadwinner, operating a millinery and sewing business. Like Sarah Josepha Hale, but with a different result, this experience underscored the economic vulnerabilities women faced. It made Duniway a women's rights champion.

In 1871, Duniway founded "The New Northwest," a weekly newspaper dedicated to women's rights, suffrage, and social reform. A crucial platform for the suffrage movement in the region, it provided a voice for women's equality and challenged social conventions. In its pages, Duniway addressed issues such as women's suffrage, property rights, and education. Her suffrage efforts extended beyond writing. A skilled organizer and speaker, she traveled throughout Oregon, Washington, and Idaho promoting women's voting rights.

Steadied by her pioneer toughness, she faced significant opposition and hostility. The work of a lifetime, her most notable achievement was leading the campaign for women's suffrage in Oregon. Despite numerous defeats in state referendums, her persistence paid off in 1912 when Oregon finally granted women the right to vote. At 78, Duniway drafted and signed the state's Equal Suffrage Proclamation, a testament to her dedication.

A true pioneer woman, Duniway died in October 1915, in Portland, Oregon after a lifetime of fighting for property rights for married women and equal educational opportunities for girls.

Why were western states the first to *grant* women the right to vote? It's arguable whether "*grant*" is the right word. It sounds like a gift, when it was earned by the fierce and dogged determination of pioneering women's rights activists. Women weren't granted anything – they fought for it.



The political motives of the male-dominated legislatures were scarcely altruistic or idealistic, but a mixture of foundational American values, old-fashioned American pragmatism and shrewd political calculus. One of their primary motives involved population growth. In territories like Wyoming and Utah, during the earliest days men vastly outnumbered women. Needing to meet minimum population levels to apply for statehood and with women in short supply, local leaders sought to solve two problems at once. They wanted to attract more settlers, and they wanted to stabilize their developing social order.

In a variation of the Cult of Domesticity, they sought women settlers to build homes and communities. Seeking statehood, local politicians and leaders saw women's suffrage as a means to differentiate their territories from others, attract women settlers and achieve statehood. You might recall the Broadway and then Hollywood hit musical ***Seven Brides for Seven Brothers***. It wasn't fiction; that's how it was done. Women's right to vote was seen as an attractive way to encourage women to venture west.

If the founders of the western states pragmatically sought women settlers to both grow their population and to tame their often rough and rowdy ways, they also had more high-minded motives. As we saw with Wyoming's William Bright, influential male leaders and politicians who supported women's rights played significant roles in advancing women's suffrage. These leaders valued women's contributions to homesteading, education, and community-building.

Influenced by progressive and reformist ideals, westerners provided broad support for social reforms and equality. The "West" was seen as a place of new beginnings and progressive change. Some territories and states saw the

extension of voting rights to women as a fulfillment of democratic principles and a natural progression of America's ideals of equality and justice.

So, in the end, it was in the so-called "Wild West" (a fictional image so embedded in the American psyche that the authentic epic saga of the hard, laborious labor of women and men homesteaders, "sodbusters," entrepreneurs, and railroaders, not cattlemen and cowboys, building a culture might never be recaptured), where American women first got the vote.

August 26 – "Women's Equality Day." With the spirit of the pioneer women freshly in mind, in 2024 it remains everyone's duty – men and women – to defend women's rights. In defending those rights, everyone ought to recall Susan B. Anthony's exhortation that "No self-respecting woman should wish or work for the success of a party that ignores her sex." To add to what I said last week, in 2024, substituting for a "a party that ignores her sex," no self-respecting woman *or man* ought to support any "party that belittles, undervalues, and degrades women."



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“Mina Westbye (left) at her homestead “villa” in North Dakota, ca. 1905” at **What It Means to Be American** (Smithsonian Institution and Arizona State University) available at [The 21-Year-Old Norwegian Immigrant Who Started Life Over by Homesteading Alone on America’s Prairie | What It Means to Be American](#) accessed August 15, 2024.

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“Souvenir of Western Women 0015 Abigail Scott Duniway.png” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Souvenir of Western Women 0015 Abigail Scott Duniway.png - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed August 6, 2024.

“Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954 poster).jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Seven Brides for Seven Brothers \(1954 poster\).jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed August 14, 2024.

“Rankin-Jeannette-170227.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Rankin-Jeannette-170227.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed August 14, 2024.

End Notes

1. Gallagher, Winifred. **New Women In the Old West: From Settlers to Suffragists, An Untold American Story**. (New York: Penguin Press, 2021).
2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. Ibid., p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 21.

5. Ibid., p. 77.
 6. Cf. Van Voris, Jacqueline. **Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life.** (New York: The Feminist Press, CUNY, 1996), p.35.
 7. Gallagher, p. 58.
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