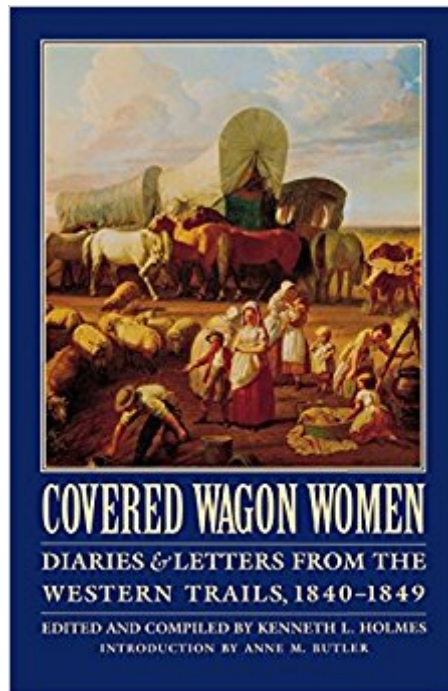


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Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1: Diaries And Letters From The Western Trails, 1840-1849



Synopsis

The women who traveled west in covered wagons during the 1840s speak through these letters and diaries. Here are the voices of Tamsen Donner and young Virginia Reed, members of the ill-fated Donner party; Patty Sessions, the Mormon midwife who delivered five babies on the trail between Omaha and Salt Lake City; Rachel Fisher, who buried both her husband and her little girl before reaching Oregon. Still others make themselves heard, starting out from different places and recording details along the way, from the mundane to the soul-shattering and spirit-lifting.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

After reading Lillian Schlissel's excellent book "Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey" I was stricken by the 'curiosity bug' and NEEDED to read more. I turned therefore to Mr. Holmes, a recognized name in this field. His series, "Covered Wagon Women", currently consists of 11 volumes, although this review is just about the first book. Volume One consists of entries from the very first period of westward migration: 1840 to 1849. The authors are women who write of their experiences in a way that reflects both their ages and educational levels -- and it is fascinating. For example, from Keturah Belknap we discover how families prepared for the 8 month trip. She tells of difficult goodbye's to family and friends; how she spun wool so that she could have a friend weave it 'just-so' to make good solid wagon covers; and even how she and her husband packed their wagons. And from many of the journals we find out how absolutely difficult it was to cross the

mountains. How in snow and rain they had to ratchet the wagons up by hoists and chains to get over huge boulders, and then lower them down the steep declines with breaks on the rear wheels. There are also the sad records left by the Donner party participants, and those that witnessed the drownings and accidents along the way. To his merit, Mr. Holmes has left these records pretty much alone. He has not changed the writers creative spelling nor punctuation, except to provide [spaces] where the sentences are run on and the meaning consequently obscured. In addition to the original writings, Mr. Holmes provides background information for each diarist, and footnotes throughout.

The study of women's history has blossomed during the past several decades, and the result has been the production of several outstanding works on the subject. "Covered Wagon Women" is an important contribution to this growing field of investigation. It is a useful work that makes available to historian and buff alike several fascinating letters and diaries written by women involved in the westward movement of the 1840s. The editor, Kenneth L. Holmes and the publisher have undertaken an ambitious project, and, this work, and others in this series, represent a benchmark in this field's historiography. The material presented in this first volume has been arranged by the editor into twelve chapters with entries by fourteen women. These accounts are representative rather than exhaustive. However, there are important documents discussing the experiences of several intelligent and articulate women on the Oregon, California, Santa Fe, and Mormon trails. The editor chose his documents well. They are all primary resources, written at the time of the incidents described or immediately thereafter. More important, Holmes did not reprint commonly used diaries. I was pleasantly surprised that Susan Magoffin's diary of her trip to Santa Fe in 1846 was not included in the collection. It is an outstanding diary but readily available elsewhere. Instead, Holmes scoured the nation's archives and libraries, and solicited copies of documents from individuals, to assemble what should be considered an exemplary collection of manuscripts. Holmes's editorial work is also outstanding. He allows the individual writers to tell their own story without correcting grammar, punctuation, and syntax.

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