

the elegant dugout

**domesticity and
moveable culture
in the united states, 1870-1900**

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Most middle-class American women of the late nineteenth century lived out their lives within the domestic realm, performing tasks that had come to be identified as intrinsically female: caring for small children, tending the ill or aged and managing the daily operations of the household. These things have been so closely identified with Victorian American womanhood that it has been possible to overlook the existence of the physical home as an autonomous cultural creation. Historians frequently have focused on the emotional or political content of the set of beliefs and activities called “domesticity” without analyzing the personal or cultural significance of domestic physical space. Yet for the average late-Victorian woman who accepted the conventional wisdom of her time—who was neither a reformer nor a reactionary—the home was a constant physical presence, the arena wherein the behavior of day-to-day life helped to define domesticity.¹ In addition to these personal meanings, the material home was a vital symbol within the context of late Victorian culture, and its continuance as a significant part of American life seemed to hinge on whether or not it would adapt to the rapidly-changing society of the late nineteenth century.

Late Victorian definitions of what it meant to be an American derived from a profound awareness of cultural and physical change and the perceived need to stabilize or standardize American social institutions.

Although mobility always had been a contributing factor to the reality of American political and social institutions, after the Civil War it became a part of the cultural awareness of Americans. The United States Census Bureau, in its documentation of the 1880 census, concentrated almost exclusively on the fact that Americans frequently changed their residence. The attention given by the Bureau to this one aspect of American life at the expense of others illustrates that, perhaps for the first time in American experience, the fact of mobility became a conscious part of national self-definition.²

Historians writing about the period 1870 to 1900 have discussed this awareness of change as manifested in areas such as the family, business, religion and politics. Of all these, however, the least-explored is the family and, especially, that construct of feminine experience called "domesticity." The primary purpose of this article is to explore several insistent questions raised by this gap in our knowledge about the late Victorian family. How was domesticity, an essentially conservative construct, reconciled with the virtues of a mobile society? What was the relationship between women themselves and the mobile physical home? Was personal as well as cultural womanhood bound up with the objects and spaces of the domestic environment? In order to illuminate these questions, I will discuss the behavior of individual women as they created living spaces in both settled and frontier areas of Kansas between 1870 and 1900. Since settlement on the frontier confronted the experience of mobility head on, it magnified phenomena characteristic of the settled life of those who did not choose to become pioneers. Thus, while the pioneer experience was in a certain way unique, in another sense it serves to shed light upon common cultural circumstances.

In addition, this article will augment a relatively new area of historiography by focusing on the experience of women settlers on the frontier. The recent work of Julie Roy Jeffrey and Glenda Riley suggests the crucial importance of the female contribution to settlement of the American West. Both these scholars reconstruct women's experience; and, in so doing, they have challenged the notion that frontier hardship demoralized women or, in the alternative, that the breakdown of prescribed roles on the frontier created a climate of equality for women. Rather, Jeffrey and Riley have given us a powerful image of the complexity of women's contributions to settlement, as well as the great variety of ways in which women dealt with that experience. However, neither have addressed the question of women's *cultural* role on the frontier in relation to the *physical domestic space* which women occupied and the objects with which they surrounded themselves. The belief in the power of the physical home to transform individual character was an underlying aspect of woman's ideal role in the late nineteenth century. In addition, her ability to create a satisfying domestic environment through the manipulation and placement of domestic objects was an essential part of the late Victorian woman's sense of herself, as well as her awareness of what it meant to be "civilized." The secondary



FIGURE ONE: Interior of dugout in Ford County, Kansas. (Kansas State Historical Society)

purpose of this article, then, is to explore the cultural role of women in the frontier in relation to the physical arena of domesticity.³

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The settlers of the Kansas frontier of the 1870s and 1880s strove to accommodate rough, make-do living arrangements with ideals of comfort and coziness. The Kansas frontier was not so much conquered as it was domesticated, and women played a leading role in this transformation. The promoters of Kansas settlement expressed their awareness of woman's cultural role when they urged male settlers to cultivate the minds and hearts of the inhabitants by establishing tasteful homes in the new land. "The neat calico dresses and sunshade hats of the ladies, and the cheap but durable raiment of the gentlemen," remarked Evan Jenkins, "were in harmony with the times, and with the plain domestic spirit that prevailed in the homestead region."⁴

Kansas women, whether in rural, frontier or urban areas, attempted to reproduce the visible symbols of home that were an important part of the late Victorian notion of civilization. Frontierwomen brought with them the furniture and books, the pianos and pans, that would recreate the stable family home wherever they went. Julia Hand was in a prairie schooner on the way to Kansas from Illinois when she presented her husband with "a volume of Shakespeare" for his thirtieth birthday. Some women compared frontier accommodations favorably to their Eastern background. When Carrie Robbins moved with her husband to Kansas from Quincy, Illinois, soon after their marriage in 1887, they lived in a sod house in the sagebrush and cactus flats west of Dodge City. At a dinner with some neighbors, she commented on the delicious meal which was "well cooked and well served. [The] table was really elegant with nice linen and silverware." Despite the fact that Carrie Robbins found herself on the

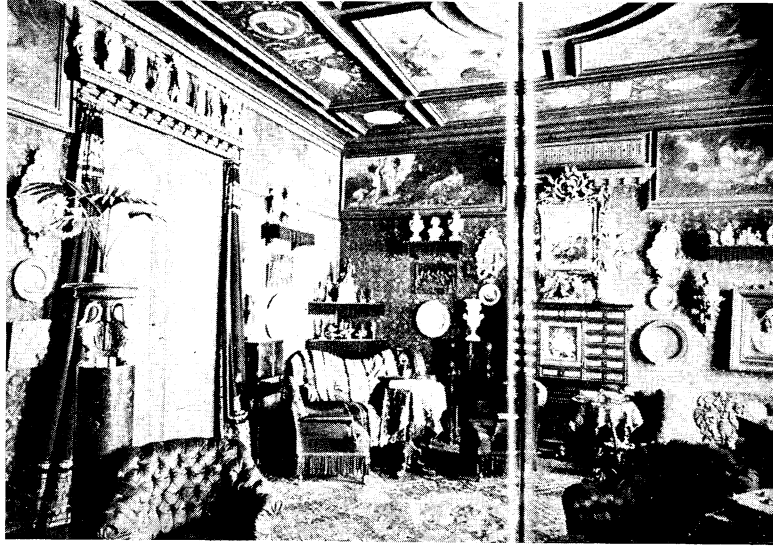


FIGURE TWO: Parlor in home in Boston, Massachusetts, 1885. (The Boston Athenaeum)

FIGURE THREE: Interior of home in Wolfville, Kansas, ca. 1880s. (Photograph Collection, University Archives, Kansas State University)



FIGURE FOUR: Interior of a Kansas residence, location and date unknown. (Kansas State Historical Society)

vast open spaces of western Kansas, with their nearest neighbor a prairie dog colony, she applied her Illinois standards to Kansas homemaking and did not find it wanting.⁵

To understand the significance of the domestic environment for these women, we must first turn to the physical artifacts of the frontier home. Figure 1 shows the interior of a dugout in Ford County, Kansas. Despite the crowding, it is evident that the homemaker has found a place for everything. Since the photograph was taken as a permanent record of their living arrangements, she probably set out her best items for the benefit of the family history, or to show relatives or friends “back East” the cultured style of dugout life. The photograph bore witness to the similarity between her present environment and that she had left behind. She propped the massive family Bible on the hutch, and on the cloth-covered table in the foreground set an impressive fancy tea service. Pictures and a calendar hang on the already-loaded walls near the stove, and a birdcage and books are prominently displayed. A doll even sits in the infant’s chair, in place of a child who would not have remained still for the length of time it took to expose the photograph, but whose presence would help to define a family’s rather than an individual’s dwelling.

In *The Northern Tier* (1880), Evan J. Jenkins described a Kansas scene that could have taken place in any parlor in the nation: “In one of those dug-outs which I visited on a certain rainy day, an organ stood near the window and the settler’s wife was playing ‘Home! Sweet Home!’” Jenkins, a surveyor for the Federal Land Office, noted the ability of Kansas women on the western frontier to transmit culture through the objects and arrangement of domestic interiors. He praised the urbane quality of even the most modest Kansas homes and acknowledged that credit for this condition went to women:

Many of those ‘dug-outs’ . . . gave evidence of the refinement and culture of the inmates. . . . The wife had been reared in the older states, as shown by the neat and tastefully-arranged fixtures around the otherwise gloomy earth walls.

Jenkins’ reference to the presence of culture focused on the woman’s ability to turn sod walls and a dirt floor into the equivalent of an Eastern parlor. “A neatly polished shelf, supported by pins driven into the wall, contained the holiday gift books, album, and that indispensable household treasure, the family Bible.”⁶ The woman who displayed objects which had cultural significance—birdcages, Bibles, tea sets—was able to give her relatives and neighbors visual proof of her lack of privation, and of the identity of her living arrangements to those she had left behind.

The apparent “sloppiness” of the clothing and other objects hanging on the walls of the Ford County dugout is less aberrant when compared with the calculated casualness of other interior scenes in Figures 2 through 4, suggesting that the crowded interior was not caused solely by a lack of space. Studied casualness was intended to communicate comfort, and an expression of comfort was closely tied to the visual impact of material



FIGURE FIVE: View of kitchen in unidentified residence. (Kansas State Historical Society)

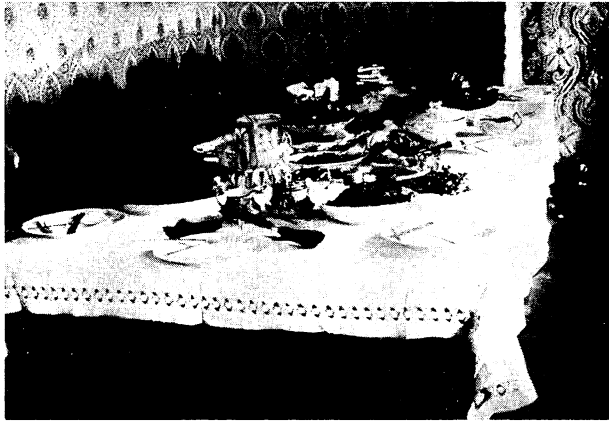


FIGURE SIX: Mrs. Holland's table, ca. 1907. (Kansas State Historical Society)



FIGURE SEVEN: House of John T. Little, Pacific and Buchanan Streets, San Francisco, California, ca. 1875. (The Society of California Pioneers)

FIGURE EIGHT: Mrs. Vaughn's drawing room, Montreal, Canada, 1893. (Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, McGill University)



FIGURE NINE: S. H. Fairfield residence, Topeka, Kansas, ca. 1885. (Kansas State Historical Society)

FIGURE TEN: Mrs. Bishop's room, Junction City, Kansas, ca. 1900. (Pennell Collection, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries)



FIGURE ELEVEN: Interior of a home in Wolfville, Kansas, ca. 1880s. (Photograph Collection, University Archives, Kansas State University)



objects. In an 1871 article for *The Ladies' Repository*, Mrs. Willing explained to her readers that one homemaker “had wrought miracles of comfort—a ten cent paper on the wall, fresh and cheery, a bright rag carpet, a white bed spread, groups of engravings from the Repository and some pencil sketches . . . ,” when she decorated the family home.⁷ In other words, actual comfort in the form of soft chairs, warm blankets or heated rooms was not as necessary in home decoration as the appearance of comfort communicated through physical objects. Some objects themselves expressed relaxation such as the shawls draped over pictures or the mantle, and the “throw” pillows on chairs or divans. Comfort also could be expressed via a carefully-planned jumble, as though the rooms were “lived-in.” [Figs. 2, 3 & 4] In the dugout, where space was at a premium and the items were “arranged” for the picture, there is the same sense of studied casualness as in the other rooms. The owner of the dugout expressed the ideal of comfortable, inexpensive, pleasant home surroundings by carefully positioning her visual clues to achieve order in a tight space.

Many photographs of architectural interiors focus on the same imagery as the illustrations in popular magazines and books; others represent a type of iconography that is related to traditional domestic genre scenes. They illustrate the transference of at least some portions of the ideal home to the trans-Mississippi West. For example, we can make a further comparison of the intent and content of the Ford County dugout photograph by looking at Figures 5, 6 and 7. In each of these last three photographs, a table has been set for a meal. Figure 5 probably shows a lower-middle-class dining room since the chairs do not match one another and the table service largely is inexpensive ceramic or glass. Figure 6 shows a middle-class home where all the chairs match and the service is silver or silver-plate, as well as

ceramic. Figure 7 is an upper-class home in San Francisco. In each one, however, the intent of the record was identical: to exhibit the abundance of the family and to illustrate the skills of the homemaker who provided these examples of the transitory domestic art of table arranging. The preparation of a table for holidays or parties was a “high art” form within the aesthetics of the household; correct positioning in the placement of dishes, silver and glassware expressed a refined, educated sensibility. While acting as housekeeper of her father’s sod house in Rice County, Kansas, Emily Combes prepared an elaborate meal with four kinds of meat, three vegetables, jelly and relishes, dessert and coffee. She “added to the table that ‘charm of civilization’ napkins and a white table cloth using for decoration a bowl of wildflowers and green leaves. . . . I was quite proud of myself,” she admitted. Even in the upper-class or upper-middle-class household, where the work of setting a holiday or party table might go to a servant, the homemaker received the credit since this function expressed the homemaker’s skill in beautifying the home.⁸ By executing this function in small town or frontier areas, homemakers linked themselves to other women across the nation.

In addition to their practical uses, certain objects possessed symbolic meanings. Their presence in a home testified that a cultured sensibility pervaded the household. Figures 8 through 11 document a middle-class genre piece of the late nineteenth century: a piano, carefully draped by a shawl, with one or more people in attendance. Women appeared most often in such photographs, but occasionally males were present as spectators or vocalists. Mrs. Sweet, who lived on a farm near Baldwin, Kansas, took piano lessons from a Miss Doyle, who came out once a week to give music lessons and usually stayed for dinner. Small, collapsible pump organs were available in the late nineteenth century, and it probably was this type of instrument which Mr. Jenkins heard in the dugout he visited. A piano or organ was one of the signals which communicated culture and refinement, whether one lived in a dugout, a frame house, or like Mrs. Bishop [Fig. 10], in a rented room in Junction City.

Books were another signal intended to communicate the degree of a family’s culture. Domestic decoration manuals and magazines pictured shelves laden with reading material, as well as vases, plates and pictures. This juxtaposition of items partially transformed the status of the book to that of a decorative object. Figures 12 and 13 are illustrations from Clarence Cook’s *The House Beautiful* (1881 edition), and Figures 14 and 15, interiors of Kansas homes. The objects displayed are essentially the same type. Figure 14, an interior view of the living room of the Rob Roy ranch house in Kansas, has nearly the same arrangement as Figure 13, with a center plate hung over the mantle and statuary and feathers or shells. Photographs and diaries indicate that the emblems of cultivated life transferred to the frontier, although the substance of currently fashionable taste was not perfectly reproduced. Emily Combes had to settle for wildflowers instead of cultivated blooms, and the dugout dweller could fit a collapsible organ but not a full-sized piano into the small space.⁹



FIGURE TWELVE: "The Living-Room," from Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1877; reprint ed. 1881), 127.



FIGURE THIRTEEN: Entranceway, from Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful*, 179.

This necessity for a certain amount of make-shift in the accommodations of Kansas rural and town dwellings was seen by Kansans as both a virtue and a liability. An almost schizophrenic mingling of attitudes appeared in most public and some private statements about the quality of Kansas life. Kansas boosters somewhat defensively claimed that the rough prairie state was healthier than other areas, as they simultaneously averred that all the advantages of civilization were present in Kansas. This seems to have been a general rural phenomenon rather than a regional one. Sociologist Harry Braverman points out that in the late nineteenth century there were far fewer differences among the lives of people in rural areas around the country than between those in urban and those in rural areas. Despite their distance from the more populous East, the women of late nineteenth century Kansas or Nebraska, for example, lived much the same sort of life they would have lived in rural or small town areas of Ohio, New York or Pennsylvania. Braverman notes the persistence of semi-rural and rural areas only a few miles from New York City even as late as 1890.¹⁰

Newspapers such as *The Rural New Yorker* (which had a large circulation in all farming areas of the country) carried articles or letters to the editor protesting against an image of rural isolation or small-town cultural backwardness. In "A Country Housekeeper's Ideal," Annie L. Jack claimed that it was as easy to lead a "refined" life in the country as in the city. "There need not be any roughness in our amusements; there is every facility for a beautiful and cultivated life, if one can have flowers and books, even if the other surroundings are simple and inexpensive." Emily Combes wrote to her fiancé in April 1871 from Manhattan, Kansas, that "The houses are neat and pretty, many being built of stone and furnished nicely—plenty of books, carpets, pictures, piano. . . . One meets some



FIGURE FOURTEEN: Living Room of the Rob Roy ranch, Kansas, ca. 1890s. (Kansas State Historical Society)



FIGURE FIFTEEN: Unidentified residence, ca. 1880s. (Kansas State Historical Society)

very cultured people.”¹¹ Other people claimed that being rough around the edges was a positive quality. An article in the *Manhattan (Kansas) Nationalist* on 13 January 1871, claimed that Kansas women were not ignorant of fashion in house furnishings, but that the family and its needs took precedence over the whims of outsiders.

Therefore excuse my preferring the comfort of my family to the entertainment of my acquaintances. And, society, if you choose to look in upon us, you must just take us as we are without pretence of any kind; or you must shut the door and say good-bye!¹²

This defensiveness reflects the transition women were experiencing as they went from producers within the home economic system to consumers of mass-produced goods in the marketplace. In this respect, the tenor of the articles directed to women in *The Rural New Yorker* changed dramatically over the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, from an emphasis on frugality to information on fashion trends. In the 1870s, the magazine contained two types of articles addressed to women. One concentrated on recipes, gardening tips and prescriptive articles on how to make a home more comfortable and attractive with very little money. Down-playing the importance of objects, these articles urged women to concentrate on the inner spirit of the home: on music, books and good feelings among the family members in order to create a congenial home. The second type of article claimed that rural women did not need to follow fashion since that was too expensive. By the 1890s, however, there was only one focus in articles aimed at the female reader. These articles suggest that rural women no longer were identifying themselves as “farmers’ wives” or “farm mothers” but as something economically different from a frugal helpmeet. The women’s section advised on the latest clothing styles and contained articles against woman’s suffrage and information on tenement reform. The articles still evidenced concern with economy, but now in the form of guidelines on current clothing and furniture styles rather than the virtues of home-made rugs. By 1899, the newspaper no longer separated rural women from the urban ideals which appeared so strongly in magazines that were not oriented specifically to a rural audience.¹³

Prior to this change, women maintained that frugality should be

balanced with beauty, and that adaptability and practicality were more important than following the dictates of prescribed fashion. Historian David P. Handlin refers to this preoccupation with the cost-effective selection of objects as the “beauty of economy,” which continued to be the dominant aesthetic ideal in many homes until well into the twentieth century. The task of balancing tasteful, comfortable surroundings and inexpensive purchases fell to women, who took this aspect of consumption very seriously. A woman’s ability to economize was as important as her creativity in home decoration. Mrs. French asked her brother in April 1891 whether Solomon was keeping the family farm at the same time that he had opened a store. “Is his wife any help to him at all, in using economy?” she inquired anxiously.¹⁴

Kansas women generally evidenced great concern for their role as women responsible for maintaining a congenial and civilized home environment, within the constraints of economy. Contrary to the dictates of magazines, however, their attention to home spaces frequently was as much for themselves as for their families. Mrs. Bingham regretted the move from Junction City to a small farm outside town. Her first experience of the tiny farm dwelling, and her realization of its distance from the tree-lined streets of Junction City, shocked and frightened her. “When I went into the little one-room place, with a loft reached by ladder, the tears came to my eyes, thinking of the contrast with the neat new home we had left.” Nevertheless, Mrs. Bingham reconciled herself to her new home once her furniture and fixtures were in place. “We finally got things in shape to live. A bed in one corner, the cupboard in another, the stove in another, with chairs and tables between and around.” For Mrs. Bingham, the division and distribution of the interior spaces and objects of the home was an important part of creating a livable situation. Her first thought was for the interior of her home, and she carefully arranged her furniture to create a sense of orderliness even in the small space. Mrs. Sweet, who moved to a farm near Ottawa, Kansas, in 1890, spent her first days in her new home freshening and arranging the fixtures and furniture. Her diary carefully notes each object, and possessively refers to all of them: “I worked at arranging things and unpacking my white dishes . . . I fixed my safe and unpacked my glass dishes.” She put down carpet, hung pictures, put up curtains, papered the walls and painted some of her furniture. With these tasks accomplished, she felt she had transformed a house into her home.¹⁵ Home, in this sense, could be anywhere as long as one had the things which made anywhere into one’s special place. Home was transportable, in other words, by transporting objects. The essential ideal of home as a domestic ambiance created by women could be physically moved in the form of household articles or interior arrangements. Thus, the homemaker provided stability for the family not by her person but by her ability to obtain and arrange objects.

The western frontier of the 1870s challenged women’s capacity to maintain the quality of the home environment. Carrie Robbins noted in her journal that she was not pleased with her first impressions of frontier

dwellings, but she remained undiscouraged. “. . . I had my first look at a sod house, rather low, dark and gloomy looking on the outside, yet with floors, windows, and the walls plastered. They are pleasant and comfortable upon the inside. I think I can make ours seem homelike. . . .” The situation frequently was not much better in the towns, where housing was short and women often had to make do with what was available. “I cant [sic] bear the idea of living in the Preston house it is so banged up and there are no conveniences either,” lamented Emma Denison in 1873. “It is nothing but a dreary house, pretty enough on the outside but ugly enough inside.”¹⁶ Carrie Robbins and Emma Denison mentioned the exteriors of their dwellings, but focused sharply on the interiors. For many women, the inside of their homes mattered more to them than the exterior. It is evident that domestic space had a particular significance for these women.

The arrangement of the objects in the domestic interior occurred within a time frame that set women’s domestic life apart from a clock-regimented society. In the first place, it was tied to the seasonal changes for the household and marked the transitional points of the year in the spring and fall. These changes were the same whether the woman kept house in the city or on a farm, and would not have varied much from New York to Kansas to Oregon. Taking down heavy winter drapes to replace them with lighter summer shades or removing wool carpets in favor of mats or light rag-rugs were seasonal chores that varied little from year to year, but which were always special events in the usual household routine. Susan B. Dimond moved to a farm near Cawker City, Kansas, in 1872. Entry after entry in her diary, beginning when she was in eastern Pennsylvania and continuing while she was in Kansas, simply stated, “Done my usual work,” or “Done my housework.” Then, in the seasons of change her entries became more detailed, with such comments as “varnished a bedstead” or “commenced to cover our lounge in the evening,” “worked on my counterpain, & papered some up stairs and fixed up the chamber.”¹⁷

As further evidence of the importance of this domestic ritual, even women who had regular servants usually reserved the largest part of this seasonal activity for themselves. Mrs. James Horton of Lawrence, Kansas, whose diary almost never mentions her attention to the details of housework unless her servant was ill, noted in April 1874 that she “took up North-chamber carpet & cleaned room.” During the course of the month she installed wallpaper in the hall, put down carpets in the bedrooms and on the stairs, removed the blinds so they could be painted, and “arranged Books.” Such entries received the same weight as her trips to Leavenworth, her social and literary meetings and her reading habits, which dominate her diary during other months.¹⁸

For newly-married women, the formation of a home was important as the symbol of conjugal happiness. “Ella and Harry are jusy as cozy as they can be,” Emma Denison commented during her own betrothal. “It made us just a little bit homesick for *our* cozy little home that is to be.” Martha Farnsworth, whose alcoholic and tubercular husband once threatened her

life with a shotgun, lived what she described as a “dreary, lonely life in tears.” Nevertheless, her home symbolized the happiness they were unable to achieve in their personal relations. When her husband died, she gave away or “burned up” the silverware, blankets, bedstead and other household items in order not to be reminded of how unhappy she had been. Ridding herself of the physical artifacts of her marriage seemed a way to rid herself of its unpleasant memories. Her second marriage, to Fred Farnsworth, gave her all of the happiness she had missed in the first. While living with his parents, she remarked excitedly that she and Fred purchased a “new Gasoline Stove,” their “*first purchase . . . in household furnishing.*” They later purchased a small home of their own in Topeka.¹⁹

With virtually no funds, Mrs. Farnsworth set about to create a pleasant ambiance by decorating the rooms.

I have one pretty Wolf rug, which I placed in front of a Bench, I made myself and covered, then I have a box, covered and two chairs. I got at [the] grocery, common, manila wrapping paper and made window shades, and we have our Piano, and we have music in our home and are happy. . . .

In late summer she put the final touches on the interior of their home by selecting and installing wallpaper. “Got a lovely Terra Cotta Ingrain, with 18 inch border, for the Parlor; a beautiful pink flowered, gilt for the dining-room and Leavender [*sic*] flowers for the bed-room and we will have a dear ‘little nest’ when once we get settled.”²⁰ By combining found objects such as grocery wrapping paper, hoarded treasures such as the Wolf rug and the piano, various purchased wallpapers, a rocker and a home-made bench, Martha Farnsworth created a personal family space to give physical manifestation of her happy marriage. Similarly, in the damp cellar under the Dimond home, where they lived during a particularly cold winter, Susan Dimond assured her family’s material and spiritual comfort as well as her own. “We moved our stove and bed down into the basement this afternoon,” she noted in her diary on 28 November 1872. “We were over to Dyton[’s] to dinner . . . brought some pictures home to hang in our basement.” Lacking funds for commercial wallpaper, she used newspapers to cover the earth walls.²¹

In their diaries and letters, homemakers frequently made allusion to themselves as aristocrats or “queens.” This may have indicated an awareness on their part that the home could symbolize economic status. Ella Whitney wrote to her cousin Hattie Parkerson in 1872, “How do you like keeping house on your own responsibility. I expect you feel as grand as a queen and step about.” Mrs. Bingham felt the crowning touch in her cottonwood shack was two carpets which she had brought with her from New York. When these were down on the floor, she felt “quite aristocratic.” It is also possible that the use of words such as these referred to the contemporary cultural metaphor of the home as a castle. Either way, the central position of the physical home is evident. For Mrs. Bingham, her New York carpets provided links with other homes she had lived in as well

as a sense of personal completeness and pride.²² The objects within the home were inextricably tied to women's concept of self as well as to their cultural role.

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The vital soul of an ideal Victorian home was the wife and homemaker who transformed an architectural shell into a "Home" by the selection and arrangement of domestic spaces and objects. Most women were committed to the reality of this ideal to the extent that they seemed unable to separate their self-image from the physical domestic environment. When Eva Moll wanted to bring her absent friend Hattie Parkerson to mind in 1898, she conjured up an image of Hattie in her home in Kansas, where "everything impressed itself so deeply upon my memory that if you have made any changes in furnishings or the arrangement of the furniture, I believe I could put everything where it was when I was there." Eva used the image of an unchanged domestic environment to tell Hattie that their friendship endured in spite of distance. Belle Litchfield, in 1899, sent Hattie a photograph of the exterior of her new home in Southbridge, Massachusetts, and then took careful pains to describe the interior: "The room where the corner Bay Window is, is our library. . . . [she then put herself into the picture] where I now sit writing. The chamber above it is my chamber, and the bay window over that is my studio."²³ Her description would not have satisfied an architect, but that was not Belle's intent. She hoped to recreate for her friend a sense of a home—not of a building—where people lived and moved within the various rooms, where the dramas and comedies of the domestic world played on their own timeless stage.

By locating a part of the home's significance in the presence of particular types of objects, Americans attested to the essentially mobile nature of the physical and spiritual home. In addition, the pianos, pictures and tables set with napkins in the "wilderness," told the world that a cultivated woman was present, one who understood and could communicate her cultural womanhood. Whatever else their ultimate role may have been in providing the institutional marks of culture such as schools and churches, women first "domesticated" the frontier, and linked it to other areas of the nation, by their awareness and use in the home of commonly-accepted cultural symbols. Rather than consider a dugout, a rented room or a damp cellar as temporary living arrangements, and thus not worth improving, they created a stable home by their attention to the domestic interior and the objects which filled it regardless of the size or condition of the dwelling. Like Julia Hand, who began moving her household goods into her sod house before it was finished, the arrangement of domestic space was one of a woman's first considerations in the frontier environment.²⁴ No doubt a portion of this concern stemmed from the fact that home was a woman's place of work, and organized quarters simplified household tasks. Then too, the objects a woman brought to her new home provided a sense of continuity whether she moved across the nation or

across town. Neither of these assumptions, however, explains why Dimond troubled to get pictures to hang in a temporary shelter, or Farnsworth's proud, detailed description of her new wallpaper, or why the anonymous decorator of the Ford County dugout wanted her fancy tea service at center-front for a photograph. In addition to the personal meanings associated with objects, the homemaker also was aware of the cultural significance of domesticity. The domestic environment, in other words, provided an essential link between personal and cultural womanhood.

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notes

1. Two works which deal with domestic material culture have informed this study. See Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoisies of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1981); and Elizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885-1915," *Journal of American Culture* 3 (Winter, 1980), 752-775. The women whose diaries and letters formed the basis of this study can be termed "middle-class" based on their husbands' occupations (postman, butcher, etc.), their level of literacy and the apparent amount of their family's wealth. There is no reason to believe, however, that only middle-class women shared the cultural awareness described in this article. Elizabeth Cohen's article suggests the importance of certain objects (such as religious icons) in working-class homes.

2. For discussions of the place of mobility in American culture and of the attempt to "nationalize" or "standardize" the American character, see Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York, 1950); Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915* (New York, 1971). *Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Tenth Census of the United States, 1880), vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1883).

3. See Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York, 1979); Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen, the Iowa Experience* (Ames, Iowa, 1981). For an analysis of the belief in the moral impact of interior decoration, and women's role as domestic decorators, see Angel Kwolek-Folland, "The Useful What-Not and the Ideal of Domestic Decoration," *Helicon Nine* 8 (Spring, 1983), 72-83.

4. Evan J. Jenkins, *The Northern Tier: or, Life Among the Homestead Settlers* (Topeka, 1880), 150.

5. Julia Hand, Diary, 24 November 1872, Kansas State Historical Society, Manuscript Department, Topeka, Kansas. Mrs. Carrie Robbins, Journal, 4 March 1887, Kansas State Historical Society, Manuscript Department, Topeka, Kansas.

6. Jenkins, *Northern Tier*, 150, 154.

7. Mrs. Jennie F. Willing, "Helpmeets," *The Ladies' Repository* 31 (January, 1871), 2.

8. Emily Combes to her fiancé, 27 August 1881, Kansas State Historical Society, Manuscript Department, Topeka, Kansas. See Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class*, 67, for her analysis of the symbolic significance of table arrangements. I have assumed that the photographs used in this article as evidence of material culture were taken as historical records or as objects to be shared with contemporaries. Thus, photographs act both as diaries and as letters.

9. Mrs. Sweet, Diary, 5 and 12 May 1891, Kansas State Historical Society, Manuscript Department, Topeka, Kansas.

10. This quality is analyzed by Karl Menninger in "Bleeding Kansas," *A Psychiatrist's World: The Selected Papers of Karl Menninger, M.D.*, ed. Bernard H. Hall (New York, 1959), 16-22. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degredation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974), 293.

11. Annie L. Jack, "A Country Housekeeper's Ideal," *The Rural New Yorker* (March 22, 1884), 190. Combes, letter of 25 May 1871.

12. Manhattan (Kansas) *Nationalist*, (January 18, 1871), 1.

13. This information was gleaned from a general survey conducted by this author in April 1982 of thirty years of issues of *The Rural New Yorker*. Sophia Bennett Crowe mentioned subscribing to the newspaper in her Diary on 14 April 1874, Kansas State Historical Society, Manuscript Department, Topeka, Kansas. Susan Dimond recorded her paid subscription to the newspaper in her budget for 1870, Diary, Kansas State Historical Society, Manuscript Department, Topeka, Kansas.

14. David P. Handlin, *The American Home: Architecture and Society, 1815-1915* (Boston, 1979), 429. Mrs. French to her brother, 5 April 1891, Domestic Science Club Papers, Kansas State University Archives, Manhattan, Kansas.

15. Anne E. Bingham, "Sixteen Years on a Kansas Farm, 1870-1886," unpub. ms., Topeka, Kansas, 1921, 9-10. Mrs. Sweet, Diary, March 1890.

16. For a discussion of the impact of frontier conditions on women's work place in the home, see Riley, *Frontierswomen*, 29-54. Robbins, Diary, 4 March 1887. Emma Denison to Hattie Parkerson, 5 January 1873, Domestic Science Club Papers, Kansas State University Archives, Manhattan, Kansas.

17. Dimond, Diary, August, October, November, 1870; March and April 1872.

18. Mrs. James Horton, Diary, April 1874, Kansas State Historical Society, Manuscript Department, Topeka, Kansas.

19. Emma Denison to Hattie Parkerson, 5 February 1873, Domestic Science Club Papers. Martha Farnsworth, Diaries, 18 November 1893, Kansas State Historical Society, Manuscript Department, Topeka, Kansas.

20. Farnsworth, Diaries, 16 May 1894, 6 March 1890, 2 December 1890, 9 May and 28 July 1896.

21. Dimond, Diaries, 25 and 28 November 1872.

22. Ella J. Whitney to Hattie Parkerson, 28 July 1872, Domestic Science Club Papers. Bingham, "Sixteen Years," 9-10. "Belle" [Isabelle W. Litchfield] to Hattie Parkerson, 19 March 1898 and 27 February 1899, Domestic Science Club Papers.

23. Eva Moll to Hattie Parkerson, 18 February 1898, Domestic Science Club Papers; [Isabelle] W. Litchfield to Hattie Parkerson, 27 February 1899, Domestic Science Club Papers.

24. Hand, Diary, 7 November 1872.