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Army Wives on the
American Frontier
LIVING BY THE BUGLES

Anne Bruner Eales



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Boulder

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Cover photo: Major Anson Mills (seated on the left), his wife, Nannie (the woman on the right), their two children, and friends enjoy a picnic on the Gila River near Fort Thomas, Arizona, mid-1880s. (Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, 111 SC 83730)

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*This book is dedicated to the
military wife,
whether the frontier her husband explores
is in the air, on the land, or at sea*

Preface

WHEN HE FOUND OUT that I was writing a book, my five-year-old grandson, William Stewart Eales, asked me if it was a "Once upon a time . . ." kind of story. After some thought, I told him that it was, because the army wives who lived the adventures described in this book come from another time and another way of thinking. In an age of equality and women's rights, it is difficult to relate to "ladies" who were raised in the restrictive chrysalis of nineteenth-century traditions and Victorian viewpoints. Most of the military wives included in this story were on the frontier between the end of the Civil War, in 1865, and the beginning of the Spanish-American War, in 1898. It was an era of western expansionism in a class-structured America that had, by modern standards, a twisted form of political correctness that amplified cultural and racial divisions.

Many officers' wives were from wealthy and influential families who had provided them superior educations, extremely comfortable surroundings, and the assurance that they were better than everybody else. Arrival on the frontier was not only a blow to their physical well-being, it also was an assault on their self-esteem. Military wives discovered that the harshness, danger, and new experiences of life in the West challenged eastern concepts of womanhood, civilization, and class in the interests of adaptation and survival. As with their husbands, a strong sense of duty kept these women living with newspaper tablecloths, toadstool carpets, and plaster ceilings that collapsed just as they were serving dinner to seventeen people.

The ladies whose ideas and lifestyles are described in this book were only a small segment of the women who lived in the trans-Mississippi West. The focus is on officers' wives because, more than any other segment of western culture, they had the education and opportunity to produce extensive letters, journals, and memoirs. Some

of the women evoke sympathy and even admiration while others reflect an image of self-centeredness and superiority. Their viewpoints are of a life lived on officers' row; laundresses who scraped their knuckles on a scrubbing board would undoubtedly have written a much different story. Even those women who shared a similar perspective related different versions of the same event, as when Seventh Cavalry wives received word of George Armstrong Custer's defeat at the Little Big Horn.

This book is not a historian's view of life within the frontier army; the words and imagery are from almost fifty military wives who lived it. Three of the women are predominant: Katherine Garrett Gibson, Martha Dunham Summerhayes, and the most famous army wife of the period, Elizabeth Bacon Custer. The books by Summerhayes, Custer, and Katherine Gibson Fougere, based on her mother's memoirs, are eloquent, and readers who search them out will be more than rewarded for the effort.

These wives all had a unique opportunity to study the frontier because the military constantly relocated not only men and their families but also entire fortifications in response to the changing demographics of settlement in the West. One family moved nineteen times in twenty years. Camps became forts and territories became states, making it sometimes difficult to pinpoint the exact location of a specific wife. For example, Camp McDowell became Fort McDowell, and wives referred to Fort Robinson in both Wyoming Territory and the state of Nebraska. There was a Fort McKenny in Texas and a Fort McKinney in Wyoming. Oklahoma was known as Indian Territory during the 1870s; within a year of the land run on April 22, 1889, part of it became Oklahoma Territory. Army wives living in the area during these two decades referred to it by both names. In an effort to avoid adding to this confusion, I have chosen, as much as possible, to use the geographic locations wives listed in their writings.

Another bewildering element of the nineteenth-century army was the question of rank. Those officers who had won advanced brevet (temporary or honorary) rank during the Civil War found themselves demoted when peace arrived. Thus, Brevet Maj. Gen. George Armstrong Custer became Lieutenant Colonel Custer during his service with the Seventh Cavalry on the frontier. However, as a courtesy,

people continued to call him "General." As an army bride, Frances Roe wrote to her family that the first lieutenant in her husband's company was called "Major," and the captain was referred to as "General." Lieutenants were simply "Mister." When Mrs. Roe, still used to civilian titles, called the general/captain Mr. Phillips, the officer's son giggled at her mistake, for which, Frances felt, the child should have been sent to bed at once.

Although resounding from over one hundred years ago, some of these stories of army life will seem familiar to today's military wife. The frontiers and the nature of warfare are different, but women of the twentieth century still wait for their men to return after months and even years away from home. While husbands fight in the desert sands or try to keep others from doing so in European mountains, army wives pursue careers, take children to have broken bones set, attend classes on how to keep the family car running, and learn about fuses, hot-water heaters, and self-propelled lawnmowers that aren't.

"Be all that you can be!" has been a popular recruiting slogan for the U.S. Army during recent years. The words suggest a potential for personal development within the military system, encouraging listeners to believe that life in the army offers opportunities for growth, self-fulfillment, and pride. While the slogan wasn't created for the military wife, it certainly applies. The challenges overcome, the experiences gained, and the memories shared truly have made military wives, whatever their service or century, "all that they could be."

Acknowledgments

ON THE SHELF of my bedroom closet are two large boxes, taking up space that I urgently need for sweaters and out-of-season shoes. The boxes are stuffed with reference notes, photographs, maps, drafts of manuscripts, and the final master's thesis they were all used to produce. If it were not for the people I am about to list, that is all this book would ever have been an academic endeavor on a closet shelf.

Primary credit for its existence must go to Robert M. Kvasnicka, an esteemed colleague and valued friend. For three years I was fortunate enough to share an office at the National Archives with this noted authority on records relating to Native American history. His knowledge of the West and his expertise as an editor inspired me to ask him to review both the thesis and this book. He was kind enough to commend the thesis to Herman Viola of the Smithsonian Institution, who in turn recommended it to Felix Lowe, former director of the Smithsonian Press. If it were not for the assistance, support, and encouragement of these three talented and dynamic men, this book would still be in the box.

The man who figuratively opened the closet door was Stephen Topping, editorial director at Johnson Books. Although I have been a writer and editor for many years, I soon discovered that producing a book is a lot harder than coming up with a thousand words for a journal article. When I was most insecure and discouraged, Steve's interest, advice, and sense of humor over the telephone invariably made me change my mind about setting fire to the manuscript. During the final stages, Mira Perrizo, the managing editor at Johnson, set deadlines when I badly needed them and always used the greatest patience and tact when suggesting where the book could be made just a little bit better. Thanks to those wonderful new friends, I now have a file cabinet and bookcase full of items in addition to the files on the closet shelf.

In gathering the research material for the text, I had extensive help from Jeffery Hartley of the National Archives library staff. His ability was matched by his good humor as he repeatedly searched data bases for obscure books and articles I requested.

Frederick Pernell and Mary Ilario at the Still Picture Branch of the National Archives were of great assistance to me in procuring many of the photographs that are used in this book. Peter J. Blodgett, of The Huntington Library, and family friend, James Noel, provided valuable help in obtaining photographs of various army wives. I am extremely grateful to Robert Barthelme of Miles City, Montana, for permission to use photographs from the outstanding collection by his grandfather, Christian Barthelme, and to John B. Riggs of the same city for his assistance in obtaining copies of the Barthelme pictures.

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Cheryl McCain, an enthusiastic graduate student at the University of Oklahoma with an interest in history, provided much-appreciated help in reviewing series and locating photographs at the university's Western History Collections. Her efforts contributed especially to the chapter entitled "Cholera and Creosote."

Dr. Sharon Gibbs Thibodeau, my supervisor and director of the Archival Publications and Accessions Control Staff at the National Archives, has been extremely supportive during my preparation of both thesis and book.

Archivists, curators, historians, librarians, and reference specialists at several establishments responded promptly and extremely capably to my pleas for information. They include John H. Akers, Arizona Department of Library, Archives and Public Records; Rebecca Ballenger and Carie Weddle, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma; Nathen E. Bender and Marjorie David, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, The Libraries, Montana State University; Ann E. Billesbach, Nebraska State Historical Society; Rhonda Brown, State Historical Society of North Dakota; Paul West Chavoya and Ann Nelson, Division of Parks & Cultural Resources, Wyoming Department of Commerce; Cate M. Fitzmaurice, New Mexico Highlands

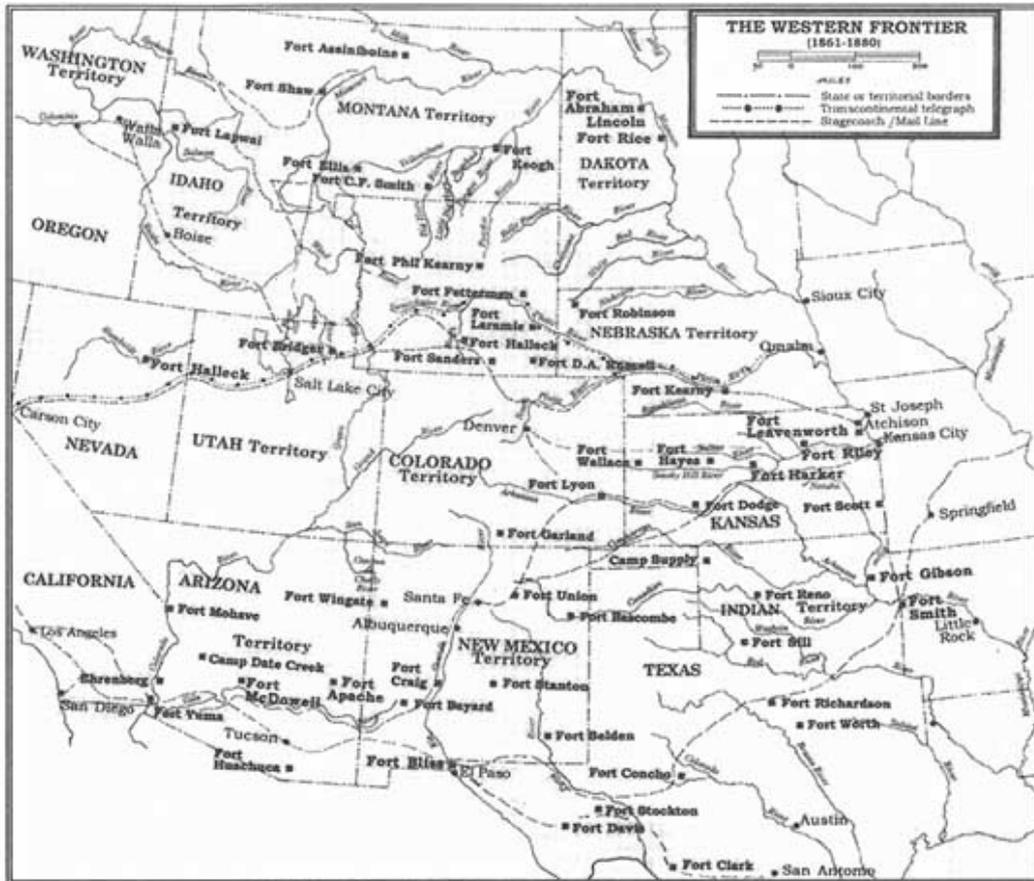
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Drs. Jane Turner Censer, Peter Henriques, and Joseph Harsh of the History Department at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, are mentors and friends who worked intensively with me on production of the thesis that formed the basis for this publication.

Good friends Sharon Brickman and Dee Dorminey read the text, offering insightful suggestions and additions. They even proved more proficient than my computer at correcting my unique way of spelling.

Finally, I have had the strongest support of all at home, in this as in every endeavor I undertake. My daughter, Laura, cooked and managed the house while I researched, read, and wrote. My oldest son, Stewart, had his phone bill increase from listening to passages read to him over the phone; my youngest son, Mark, carried books back and forth to the library. My husband, Lonnie, spent hours in the Pentagon library, days taking notes at Carlisle Barracks, and weeks preparing the map for this volume. He has listened to the entire text read through at least three times and made suggestions that have proven invaluable.

To Lonnie I wish to express the greatest thanks of all, for making me an army wife who knows what it means to live on the frontier, do without, and have my mind opened to new people and different ideas. Whether they have echoed across the parade ground at Yongsan Military Compound in Seoul, Korea, or reverberated through Drake-Edwards Kaserne at Frankfurt, Germany, we, too, have heard the bugles call.



The Girl I Left Behind Me

I FOR TWO DAYS the size of Alice Blackwood Baldwin's world had been approximately ten feet long by four feet wide. Wrapped in fur robes and blankets, with hay piled around her legs and feet to keep them warm, this army bride from Michigan had seen virtually nothing except the inside of the military ambulance transporting her and her husband, Lt. Frank Baldwin, to their new home at Fort Harker, Kansas. Her only opening to the outside world was a porthole-sized gap in the front canvas that allowed the enlisted man who was driving to see the mules; the back opening was cinched tight against a snowstorm. Even if both ends of the canvas had been completely open, however, Alice could not have seen very far. A white curtain of snow blurred the view ahead and rapidly concealed the trail behind. What was passed was lost; the future hidden by the swirling snow.

Army officers' wives such as Alice Baldwin found that more than the countryside blurred with each mile they traveled toward the American frontier. The demands of a lonely, harsh, and often dangerous existence in the West would gradually obscure many of the Victorian viewpoints and traditions learned in an increasingly remote civilization. Most army wives came from affluent backgrounds and were educated but, like the trail, their eastern lifestyles of comfort and gentility would also fade into the distance. Although they were not immediately aware of it, the frontier would change not only their lives but also their view of life.

In their movement west, the women left behind a stereotyped and confining Victorian gender role that had identified them as social appendages to their husbands. In the nation's early years, families had worked together, sharing common values and viewpoints, to make

farms or cottage industries successful. However, industrialization, immigration, and gradual urbanization in the nineteenth century had brought rapid changes, unsettling and transforming the pattern of American life. Children moved west or left the farm for factories in cities, where they were exposed to a jumble of new ideas, religions, cultures, and temptations. Fathers, too, left home, pursuing wealth and success in a marketplace they considered unfit for the "gentler sex." Uneasy about the implications of these changes for society, traditionalists decided that the family needed a "gyroscope," a moral stabilizer to keep husband and children from whirling out of control. If there was to be order in the home and, hence, in society, "ladies" would have to be that unchanging core in the midst of confusion. In their "cult of domesticity," people of the upper class were taught that wives existed to create for their husbands and children a secure and peaceful haven from the shifting world around them.

Contemporary literature championed the view that it was the "foremost responsibility of a new wife ... to provide for her husband . . . the single spot of rest which a man has upon this earth for the cultivation of his noblest sensibilities."¹ Authors suggested that if a wife did not provide this supportive environment at home, her husband might begin to drink too much or pursue other "interests."

Wives and mothers were to "indoctrinate" their children with moral and religious precepts such as sobriety, self-control, and self-improvement through the "gentler emotions" while fathers instructed offspring in the "more important" qualities of logic and reasoning. To men of the period, this was only proper. Husbands considered their wives morally superior but also thought women were physically and probably mentally inferior. A husband loved his wife and cherished her central role as the moral mainspring of the family, expecting her to reciprocate by being properly submissive to his intellectual superiority and rationality. Although state governments increasingly gave women a voice in their own affairs during the nineteenth century, control of a woman's person and property often passed directly from her father to her husband. An army wife didn't even get to "own" her own name. She was called "Mrs. General Custer" or "Mrs. Colonel Grierson," reflecting her husband's status and authority rather than her own value as an individual.

Victorian ladies in the East "lived in a kind of earthly limbo . . . modesty and decorum were the order of the day."² They were trained to do good, be good, and look good, with the proper deportment, clothes, and coiffures. At the onset of puberty, the free-spirited Frances Elizabeth Willard complained, "This is my birthday and the date of my martyrdom. Mother insists that at last I must have my hair 'done up woman-fashion.' My 'back' hair is twisted up like a corkscrew; I carry eighteen hairpins; my head aches miserably; my feet are entangled in the skirt of my hateful new gown. I can never jump over a fence again so long as I live."³

Young women like Willard were taught that a wife's appearance and activities were a status symbol for her husband. Her pale complexion meant that she didn't have to work outside. Her restrictive corset and heavy petticoats proclaimed that her husband provided her with servants. (Bending to scrub floors or wash clothes was impossible in whalebone stays.) Dressed in a manner that projected an image of status and affluence, women were then expected to fulfill the duties of their station in a constant round of ritual visits or social calls on family members and friends. The ladies would visit and leave their cards at up to sixteen houses a day; one woman called it a "dabbling" lifestyle. Implicit in this obligatory social activity was the presence at home of servants to do the cooking and cleaning, seamstresses to do the sewing, and nurses (nannies) to care for the children. Eastern men of the upper class believed that for a man to uphold his place in society and proclaim his worth to the world, the demeanor of his Victorian wife had to be demure, deferential, and domestic.

This was especially true of military families in the East. Overlaid on the restrictive civilian culture was an array of army rituals and practices that had to be rigidly obeyed for social acceptance and professional advancement. A civilian wife was strictly segregated from her husband's career; in the military, however, where rank and seniority ruled, officers' wives could exercise a profound influence on their husbands' professional standing through the use of their connections and social skills. When Col. Benjamin Grierson was passed over for promotion to brigadier general in 1887, a visiting congressman told him that "it was the Washington, New York, and West Point social influence which promoted General (Wesley) Merritt ...

and we can scarcely estimate the power of women and social influence in Washington."4In 1875, when Mrs. George Crook wanted her husband transferred from Arizona to a staff assignment in the East, she whispered her plea in the ear of President Ulysses S. Grant as the two strolled arm-in-arm during a White House reception. A similar exchange between Martha Dunham Summerhayes and President Grover Cleveland won her husband, John (Jack), promotion to captain and reassignment from the Eighth Infantry to the Army Quartermaster Corps. During the Civil War, Elizabeth (Libbie) Bacon Custer charmed senators, congressmen, and senior military officers into supporting the career of her husband, the "boy general," George Armstrong ("Autie") Custer. Gen. Philip Sheridan was so taken with her that he sent her a present from Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 10, 1865the table Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant had used to write the conditions of surrender for Gen. Robert E. Lee. Her charm and powerful connections not only furthered Custer's reputation in life; Libbie convinced friends to help her glorify him in death. The army leadership measured success for such women and their husbands by their political skill and social acceptability in an image-oriented, ceremonial environment.

If an officer, his wife, and their children exemplified the proper army (and Victorian) family, the potential for promotion for men who served on a headquarters staff was far greater than the opportunities available to men serving in "the other army," the line officers on the frontier. For this reason, officers in the East were especially sensitive and demanding about the behavior of their wives. Men trained to command others and accustomed to unquestioning obedience from their subordinates often applied that authoritarian approach to their family life. At least one excessively organized army colonel codified his wife's responsibilities through the following guidelines he established for her as a young bride:

1. You will see that meals are served on time.
2. You will not come to the table in a wrapper [robe].
3. You will smile at breakfast.
4. If possible, you will serve meat four times a week.

5. You will not move the furniture without my permission.
6. You will present the household accounts to me by the fifth of each month.
7. You will examine my uniforms every Tuesday and, if they need repair, you will take the necessary action.
8. You will do no work in the evenings. You will entertain me.
9. You will not touch my desk.
10. You will remember you are not in command of anything except the cook.⁵

Although nineteenth century women submissively accepted such dictates from their husbands, a very low Richter-scale rumbling of discontent did exist. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott spoke out at the Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights in 1848, but it was a minuscule movement. Women who wanted to challenge their limited lifestyle did it increasingly through literature. Two of the three best-selling novels of the nineteenth century were written by women: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and August Jane Evans Wilson's *St. Elmo*. Nathaniel Hawthorne called the lady authors "dd scribbling women."⁶ Writers such as E.D.E.N. Southworth, Mary Jane Holmes, and Ann Sophia Stephens popularized the strong, rebellious, and sensual heroine who manipulated men. Holmes sold a total of two million books, and Southworth was the most popular female author of the nineteenth century, suggesting that their expressly anti-Victorian characters were appealing to their readers.⁷

Traditionalist men and women published extensively in response to this perceived threat to society and the status quo. Their "politically correct" periodicals, journals, and guides reminded ladies of their proper place in the precepts of "true womanhood." Julia Ward Howe, author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," believed that a woman would refuse "to return to her chimney corner life of the fifties" after the Civil War, but the vast majority of eastern ladies still considered equality a step down.⁸ One woman commented that giving women the vote would mean that "Bridget and Dinah [Irish servants and former slaves] will have it . . . a charming picture of equality for Southern ladies to contemplate."⁹ Thousands of women had

joined the work force during the war, but "a Louisianian was appalled to find an antebellum school friend clerking in a New Orleans department store in the eighties, for she had once been 'a lady.'"¹⁰

Such were the stereotypes army wives carried with them as they began their journeys west, packed along with their calling cards, crinolines, and the chamois-skin face masks used to protect their complexions against the sun.

The trip itself was a journey to self-discovery and individualism. Future army wife Katherine (Katie) Garrett began such a transition from eastern lady to western woman when she left her home in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1874 to visit her sister, Margaret (Mollie) Garrett McIntosh. Despite family objections, Mollie had married Lt. Donald McIntosh, a part-Indian officer assigned to the Seventh Cavalry in Dakota Territory. The very reason the girl was going west to visit them involved a serious question of Victorian etiquette. Following the death of Katie's father, the ladies of the family had all donned culturally mandated heavy crepe mourning veils. When Katie developed a severe cough soon afterward, the doctor recommended that she discard the veil. Worried about how "such an unprecedented laxity of mourning conventions" might appear to family and friends, it was decided that Katie didn't have to wear the veil, as long as she was out of sight west of the Mississippi.¹¹

The entire family went to the station to see the girl off. Katie's mother admonished her not to forget her cod liver oil and "gentle breeding," her sister Sally warned against strangers, and her former slave nurse advised her to watch out for Indians. As the train pulled out, she waved good-bye to them with her black-bordered handkerchief and stuffed her mourning veil away in a bag. The man across the aisle introduced himself as Monsieur Bois, a Frenchman from New Orleans, but Katie, mindful of her sister's warning, merely nodded. After a night in a lower berth, she awoke early the next morning and reached in the dimly lit carriage for her clothes. She went to the washroom and was in the process of brushing her teeth when the porter called through the door that the French gentleman said she had his pants. When Katie assured the porter that she certainly didn't have the trousers, he went away, only to return twice more to plead with her to give him the pants, which had \$500 in the pocket. Throwing what she

thought was her duster around her shoulders and storming out of the washroom, Katie faced the Frenchman with the wide linen trousers draped around her. In the darkness, she had pulled the pants off the rail by mistake, and she was now terrified that the man would have her arrested for trying to steal the money. Katie apologized profusely, and, being a gentleman, Monsieur Bois was required to forgive a lady. He even invited her to breakfast. Katie, with Sally far away, daringly accepted the invitation. In her own words, she was now "launched upon the road of high adventure."¹²

Katie first thought of herself as an observer "in an alien world," but soon came to realize that she was becoming a part of that world, "groping into the unknown."¹³ Instead of waiting to be called to dinner by a servant, she learned to elbow her way to the food table when the train stopped for meals at an eating shack. To keep warm when sleet began to fall, the girl accepted a drink out of a flask belonging to the man sharing her seat. Lacking a cup, she had hesitated, but he had insisted, saying, "Go right ahead, sister. I ain't afeared to drink after you."¹⁴ Never having imbibed anything stronger than blackberry cordial as medicine, she coughed, sneezed, and ended up tipsy from the experience. Katie was exposed to gambling as the passengers wagered on everything, especially their arrival time at the next station, and her modesty was probably challenged when men urinated out the train windows, as they often did on western trips. As her train careened across the screeching, swaying Mississippi River bridge, Katie may well have considered the fearful yet exciting passage as symbolic of the changes in her life since leaving Washington only a few days earlier.

The train trip had been a revelation to Katie as she traveled westward, alone but in relative comfort and security. In sharp contrast, Mollie's solitary journey from Fort Abraham Lincoln to meet her sister's train at Columbia, Dakota Territory, required her to risk the ever-present dangers posed by Indians, outlaws, and inclement weather. In the East, Mollie's nerves had gone "jittery at a discord struck on the piano or guitar."¹⁵ In the West, Mollie carried a gun, and Katie watched in awe as her older sister negotiated with the prostitutes at a bar called "One Eye Jim's" to get the girls sandwiches and coffee. When a woman in a low-cut green gown left to arrange for