

Frontier Children, by Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. xi, 164 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Reviewer Ruth M. Alexander is professor of history at Colorado State University. She is the author of *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (1995) and a number of articles about the history of adolescents.

Frontier Children offers a visually stimulating and thought-provoking window onto the lives of frontier children in the trans-Mississippi West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Authors Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith have collaborated on several books about the history of women in the American West; here, they turn their attention to children, drawing on letters, journals, memoirs, and a stunning array of black-and-white photographs and illustrations. Their purpose is not to provide comprehensive treatment of children and childhood on the American frontier, for they believe the topic is too complex to permit full coverage or analysis in a single volume. The authors note that children lived in an extraordinary array of geographic, spatial, and social contexts—ranging from urban centers to mining camps, pueblos, farming communities, tribal villages, and reservations—and experienced diverse meanings of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Moreover, the history of children in the American West is in its infancy, as scholars are just beginning to define the methodologies and interpretive questions that will allow them to uncover and understand the experiences of frontier children. For all these reasons, Peavy and Smith think it premature to try to write a definitive account. Instead, they provide a “verbal and visual montage that celebrates the experiences of children growing up in the American West” (13). Through “vivid snippets” (13) of evidence, the authors seek to reveal both commonalities and sharp differences in the lives of girls and boys of Anglo-American, African American, Native American, European, Hispanic, and Chinese parentage on the American frontier.

Peavy and Smith have arranged *Frontier Children* in thematic chapters that cover key experiences or episodes in frontier childhood. They begin with a chapter titled “Ebb and Flow: Frontier Children on the Move.” Here they explore how and why children and families moved to the trans-Mississippi West from elsewhere in the United States or from other nations; they also portray the movement of children and families from one area or region of the frontier West to another. Peavy and Smith establish in this chapter the pattern they use throughout the book, organizing their evidence around children from different racial or ethnic groups. First, the authors discuss the regional migration patterns of nomadic Indian tribes in the nineteenth-century West. Then

they turn to the westward migration of European and native-born white settlers and their children. Subsequently they discuss the forced migration of Indian families from native lands, the westward migration of African American children and parents who sought freedom from racial oppression, and the migration of Chinese from the Asian continent to the American frontier. In other chapters they investigate the homes and physical environments of frontier children, family life, work and play, schooling, and coming-of-age experiences. Whatever their subject, Peavy and Smith make deft use of quotations and photographs. They want us to see frontier children not from the vantage point of adults, but through the eyes, hearts, and minds of the young people themselves as they grew up in the West's frontier environment.

Frontier Children offers students, scholars, and general readers a compelling inquiry into a significant aspect of frontier history. What the authors do best is to use small and scattered fragments of evidence—whether textual or visual—to suggest broad-ranging questions about the experience of children in the American West. For example, in the chapter titled "Blurred Boundaries: Frontier Children at Work and Play," the authors ask readers to ponder the possible effects on children's social and psychological development of being put to hard work at early ages. At the same time, they ask readers to wonder about cultural and discursive representations of childhood in the American West. After all, in addition to its child workers, the frontier was home to a small minority of children from affluent families (both white and Hispanic) who spent their time at play and at school rather than in the field, mine, or store.

Frontier Children is a satisfying volume, but readers may wish that the authors' analysis had been more probing. While it is of great value to learn that no single version of childhood existed on the frontier, it is also important to know how children perceived and contended with the variety around them. Although the authors cannot help but acknowledge that Asian, African American, and Native American children often suffered because of the hostile actions and prejudices of whites, we gain in this "montage" little knowledge of how children perceived, understood, or reacted to differences of culture and privilege. Perhaps in their next collaboration Peavy and Smith will explore more fully the nature and impact of intercultural contacts for children on the American frontier.

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