Women of the Old Northwest Territory:
Daily Life on the Frontier 1750-1870

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Daily life was not easy for white women in the Old Northwest in the years 1750-1870. The Old Northwest consisted of what is now known as the states of Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. These women not only faced the everyday tasks that were required of white middle-class women on the East Coast, but they had to do them without the technological advances or the physical and moral support of the East. Once cities or small communities were established in their areas, their lifestyle became close to that of the white women of the East. These women not only looked after their children, but while doing so they were often cooking, cleaning, or weaving their own fabric in order to make clothes for the family. They were often viewed as partners in the pioneering era due to the need of the male for the female to provide him with assistance whenever and wherever needed. “The frontier offered no easy life, and few there entered the wilderness without realizing how stern and continuous must be their struggle for survival… Never was there less hope for the easy-going, lazy, inefficient, and the unhealthy. Men and women had to be hardy as well as courageous and industrious.”¹ These women prepared food for the men and when needed would help them in the fields.

One of the first things that women did when moving to the frontier was to plant a vegetable garden and flax. The garden or a vegetable patch was important because it allowed women to add variety to the diet. They often planted beans, peppers, pumpkins as well as many other vegetables. They would harvest these vegetables and preserve them so that the family would have a more balanced meal during the winter months. They would preserve them by drying out the vegetables since canning was not practiced. Since this garden provided food in the winter it was important to have a very productive garden².

Corn was also an important crop in the Old Northwest Territory. It was a low maintenance crop and grew easily among the trees and semi-cleared land, “it produced perhaps double the food per acre of any other grain and quickly became the staple item in the diet of humans and animals.” While the men planted and harvested the corn most of the time women were not exempt from any work dealing with this plant. They had to husk the corn and take it off of the cob. Then they would grind it “into meal which they would use to boil to make mush and baked to make Johnny cake and corn pone.” If they did not grind it they used it for boiling in stew or soup or fried the corn.

Another important crop to plant soon after settling was flax. Flax is a long fiber that was used to weave into fabric before there were enough sheep to provide the amount of wool needed for weaving fabric. Flax was useful for the women’s task of making clothing. Flax was spun much like wool into thread and then loomed together to make linen cloth before there were enough sheep to provide wool for this task. “Every women was her own weaver.” This was because there were very few shops into which a lady had access to buy manufactured fabric. “We raised flax, making table linen, civerlids & counter pins, flannels, linsey and & janes doing our coulering with barks from trees &roots, making lovely checks & and plads.”

The style of dress always suited the ladies work for that day’s work but their outfits were not as elaborate as their male counterparts. The weather also played a part in deciding the style

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3 Madison, 68
4 Madison, 68
5 Madison, 70
6 Madison, 70
of dress for women as well as what their clothes were made from\textsuperscript{9}. Cotton, woolen, or linen were a few of the common materials for dresses that a lady would wear around the house. The dresses were often one piece and slipped over the head and tied at the neck with a drawstring.

When there were finally enough sheep to produce the amount of wool needed that opened more work for the women. After the sheep were sheered the women had to wash the fleece, scour it and picked it clean of dirt, straw and burs. Then they had to card the fleece and spin it to thread. Women often had to weave their own fabric from their spun thread\textsuperscript{10}.

Spinning wheels were common furniture in the house as well as a necessity. The sound of the spinning wheel was “more or less continuous\textsuperscript{11}” because when the women of the house, whether wives or daughters, were not needed for more important tasks they were spinning thread\textsuperscript{12}. The average size family required a fairly large amount of textile work, therefore there was rarely excess fabric to sell or trade\textsuperscript{13}.

Raising a family on the frontier brought it’s own set of challenges. Pioneer women tended to marry younger than that of the women on the East Coast and as a consequence had more children. Women often began having children at the age of eighteen until their mid-forties; the frequency of the children was one about every other year.\textsuperscript{14} Pioneering mothers were often depended upon to give practical advice to her children.\textsuperscript{15} Pioneering daughters were lucky to have their mother around to give them advice. Their mothers had left their families and sources of advice on the East Coast when they followed their husbands west.

\textsuperscript{9} Cockrum, 173
\textsuperscript{11} Buley, The Old Northwest, 205
\textsuperscript{12} Buley, The Old Northwest, 205
\textsuperscript{14} Madison, 64
\textsuperscript{15} Groves, 91
These first pioneer women could not look to their mothers or other female relatives for advice because of the distance between them. Communication was not reliable and those people who were starting on a journey back to the East Coast or to another town were the only way letters were transported. Thus pioneer women had to be strong emotionally and physically. Self-reliance on the part of these women was a necessity. When the women found themselves in troublesome circumstances they “could handle the rifle and join with their husbands, or in the absence of the latter, become their substitutes defending their children with skill and courage.”

These women worked hard and taught by their daughters beginning in early childhood until they were married. The son of a pioneer woman recalls: “The mother worked from early morning to late at night preparing the needed clothing for the family and doing her household work. The daughters stood nobly by their mother, helping in every way they could.” During the Civil War (1861-1865) Mary Livermore recalls seeing many northern farm women in the fields doing the field work that she believed was supposed to have been done by the men. She admits that it displeased her at first, but she learned to respect how hardworking and how skillfully the women did the men’s job for themselves.

Women also did the housecleaning that women on the East preformed as well. Eliza Julia Flower an English gentlewoman’s husband recorded what he thought of American women and how they pursued the never ceasing chores of cleaning the house while traveling in Indiana and Illinois. He noticed that even when the day’s work was going to be difficult the women still took great care to dress themselves appropriately. They did so just in case of a sudden visitor and

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16 Groves, 79
17 Groves, 79-80
18 Groves 98
19 Cockrum 172
they had to be presentable. They also broke the larger tasks down into manageable pieces thus giving what he called a sleight-of-hand in this quote “American females have a sleight-of-hand in getting through housework of all kinds without apparent labour.”

Eliza’s sister-in-law records how she adjusted to dealing without servants at all, when writing to her brother in England suggesting that his bride should he move to America on the frontier, would have to be able to make some significant adjustments. She also describes her weekly routine as to housecleaning chores as well as how her daughters helped her. “One day I wash, 2nd iron, 3rd make soap, 4th candles, 5th bake, 6th clean house.”

Washing clothes was not an easy task. The women would go to a nearby pond, river or lake with a kettle and the soiled clothes. She would then build a fire and boil the clothes clean. Sometimes the men of the family would bring water to the house and then the fire would be built just outside the home and there she would boil water to wash the clothes in. This task with young children around was dangerous not only because of the fire but also because of the kettle of boiling water.

In case of an accident or illness, the first line of defense was the pioneer woman. She had many different home remedies some based on Indian medicine, some out of home health care books, and some were traditional; passed down from generation to generation. The pioneer families became reliant on these forms of medicine because of the lack of doctors in the

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22 Flower, 89

community. Should there be one they, the doctors, were often too expensive for the family to see unless it was a dire emergency.²⁴

Lack of close neighbors, in terms of location, provided women on the frontier with more work than that of the women on the East Coast. They had to complete all of the household duties; maintain a steady food supply, make their own cloth to then make the family’s clothes, washing the clothes and raising children. They were respected by their husbands, but looked down upon by the ‘city people’ of the East Coast. As cities and small towns in the Old Northwest began to appear, the rural wives still had just as much work with the possible exception of making the cloth from scratch if they could afford to buy manufactured cloth; primarily they were still self sufficient.

“In a less expansive way than was true of man, the frontier woman also had opportunity to become self-made. She could not hope to reach the heights of power or distinction or influence that were open to men, but could arrive at a reputation, at least locally, for knowing how to handle herself and her circumstances and thus gain respect and admiration.”²⁵ Pioneer women, a unique combination of the white, middle-class women of the East Coast and brave frontier survivor deserved then and still do deserve now respect for all that they accomplished with very limited resources.

²⁴ Madison, 71
²⁵ Groves, 90
Bibliography


