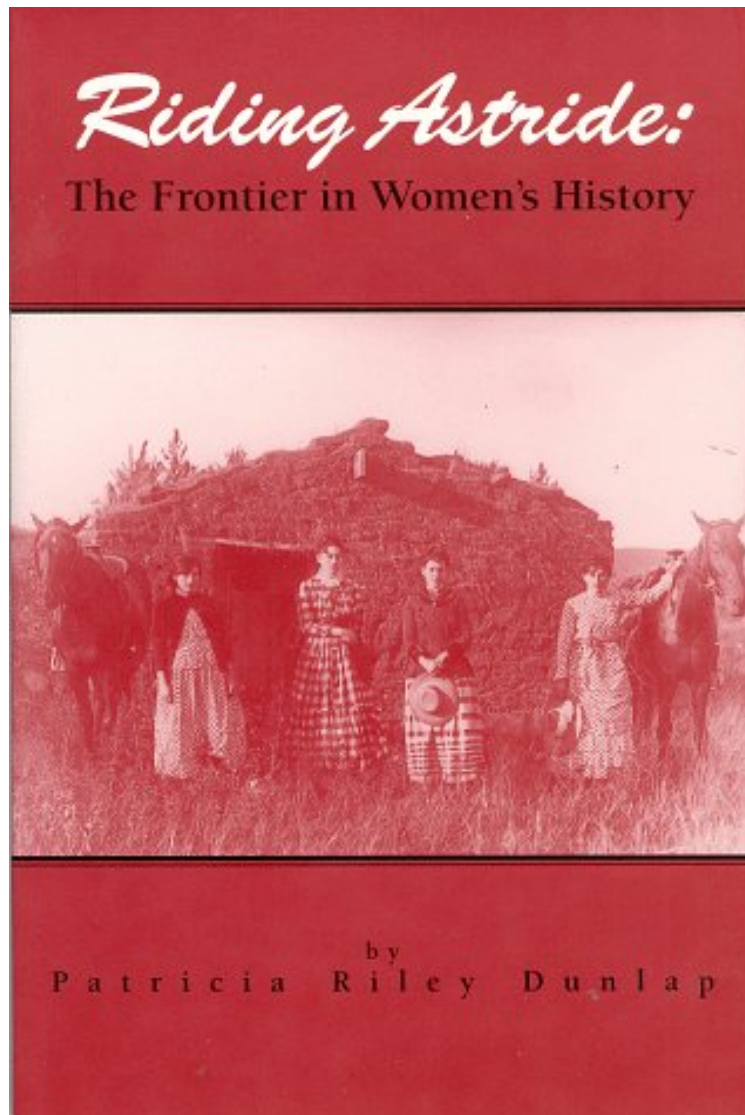


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Riding Astride: The Frontier in Women's History

Patricia Riley Dunlap

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Patricia Riley Dunlap : Riding Astride: The Frontier in Women's History before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Riding Astride: The Frontier in Women's History:

Riding Astride is a study of the eccentric and extraordinary women of the frontier West whose extreme and sometimes even militant behavior helped break down the strict social codes of the nineteenth century and transform American culture. Historian Patricia Riley Dunlap discards the glamorized, romanticized wild and woolly West found in other

portrayals, revealing the fascinating reality of the lives of exceptional frontier women. These women branded cattle, mined for gold and silver, farmed, ranched, performed in rodeos and wild west shows, worked as journalists, doctors, and attorneys--and rode horseback astride rather than sidesaddle. Because they didn't conform to the idealized vision of female as pure, moral, domestic, and delicate, these women were considered peculiar and thus have been either ignored or maligned by historians. Now, in *Riding Astride*, these "peculiar" women are recognized for redefining the social and economic roles of their gender and for initiating the struggle for women's rights in the United States.

"General readers will find the book entertaining." -- Choice, October 1996

About the Author Patricia Riley Dunlap, a third-generation historian, is an instructor of American history and the history of American women at Northern Virginia Community College in Alexandria, Virginia and Germanna Community College in Locust Grove, Virginia. She is also president of Dunlap Communications. Her columns and articles have appeared in numerous journals and newspapers.

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Introduction The eminent historian Frederick Jackson Turner attributed the characteristics of American society and institutions to the frontier experience. According to his thesis, the ready availability of unclaimed land and the primitiveness of pioneer life were the determining factors of American democracy and culture. Turner's insight aside, he was a typical nineteenth-century male. For him, as well as for his professional colleagues, history was the study of men. The attempt to introduce women into the American chronicle is less than a generation old. Had Turner and his associates studied women as well as men, they would have found an even more radical transformation than that which they trumpeted. As women adapted to the hardships of the frontier, they learned that the tendency toward egalitarianism and individualism shared among men worked nearly as well for women. They developed the self-assurance necessary to expand their social and economic horizons. In a fundamental way, Turner's frontier thesis is as real for the women of the United States as for the men. Thanks to recent efforts, immigrant pioneer women have been discussed at length. These women set a standard that ultimately helped to civilize the "Wild West," but they did little to change the role assigned to women back home in the East. The more eccentric western women have yet to be heard. Their extreme and even militant behavior helped crumble the strict social codes of the nineteenth century. These mothers and daughters of the trans-Mississippi West and the conversion they compelled are the subjects of this study. Because of their reproductive function, women have traditionally been identified solely as biological creatures. Before the early twentieth century, the business of propagation consumed the adult woman from adolescence to death. It was the primary cause of death and disability in women, and there seemed to be no safe way to prevent it other than abstinence--an unacceptable option to most married couples. Until the second quarter of the twentieth century, the use of birth control was usually illegal and nearly always considered immoral. Its availability was severely limited and knowledge of its use confined to the most sophisticated individuals and, antithetically, informed prostitutes. The only methods regularly used were pre-ejaculation withdrawal (considered sinful by many religions) and celibacy often practiced by more dominant middle-aged women to the disappointment of their husbands. Self- or illegally induced abortions were common as well, although the secrecy surrounding them make accurate statistics impossible. The use of diaphragms and then condoms didn't become popular until after World War I, when advancing technology made them both more dependable and more comfortable. Before the twentieth century, a married woman could expect to become pregnant every two to three years during her twenties and early thirties and to be giving birth to her youngest children in her forties, if she lived that long. Six to eight pregnancies was typical and fifteen not unheard of. Thanks to ignorance concerning prenatal and infant care plus the proliferation of childhood diseases, slightly less than two-thirds of the children born in nineteenth-century America lived to become adults. One out of seven American babies died at birth. Mothers were in as much danger as babies. Deaths caused by infections such as "childbirth fever" or "Bright's disease," breech births, and other complications killed them as often as they did their offspring. Knowing no better, doctors and midwives delivered babies with hands that had seen no soap for days, used dirty, rusty instruments, and were too often helpless in the event of hemorrhaging and prolonged labors. At the turn of the twentieth century, a woman's life expectancy was forty-eight years, and one out of thirty women could expect to die in childbirth. Tuberculosis was the only medical condition more hazardous to women. Generally speaking, if a nineteenth-century woman wasn't pregnant, she was lactating. Only the wealthiest of families could afford wet nurses on a regular basis, and glass bottles with rubber nipples were used only in cases of emergency and then temporarily. A new mother breastfed her child one to two years, sometimes producing an additional baby before weaning the elder sibling.... Each new child, therefore, generated approximately two years of confinement for its mother. With pregnancies usually no more than two years apart, the isolation was nearly continuous until death or menopause. Before the twentieth century and its de-mystifying of the reproduction process, women were literally prisoners of sex, as well as the births, tragedies, offspring, and delicate conditions that accompanied it.... Despite considerable impediments, exceptional nineteenth-century American women of the frontier West somehow overcame their biology to achieve unusual and often daring feats. They rode horseback astride rather than sidesaddle, branded cattle, taught school, mined fast-moving rivers for gold and silver, farmed, ranched, performed in rodeos and wild west shows, worked as journalists, doctors, attorneys, and much more. These extraordinary individuals are the subjects of

this work....