

The Diary as Historical Puzzle

Seeking the Author Behind the Words

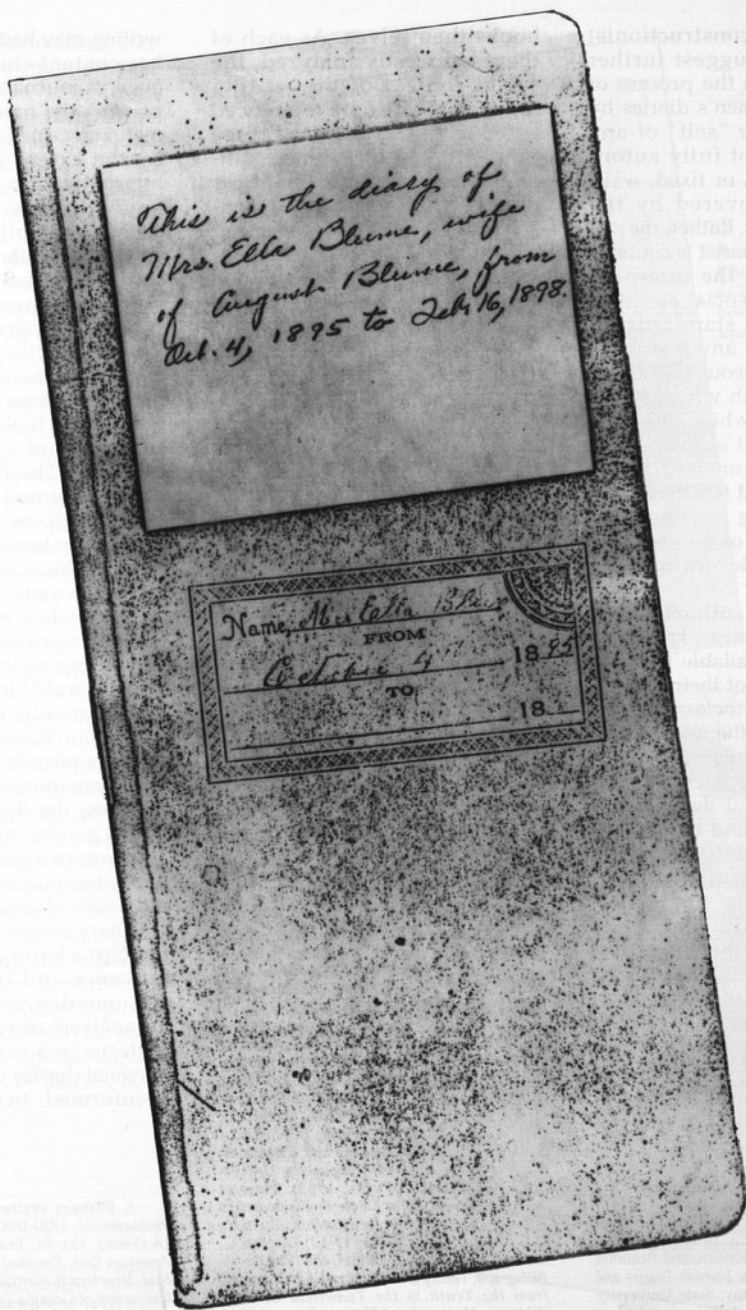
by Gayle R. Davis

The past twenty years have witnessed a flourishing interest in women's public and private personal writing as it can inform our understanding of American culture. Responding to that interest, publishers have produced an unprecedented number of women's diaries that were previously unavailable to a public audience.¹ The texts have been read and examined as representatives of an inadequately researched genre, stimulating debate over such issues as the existence of a particular "women's voice" or gender-specific writing patterns. In these and other important ways, diary study has expanded and challenged conventional perceptions of women's literature. Logically enough, diaries have also been used by social historians seeking details of ordinary women's experiences, emotions, and values. Private personal diaries potentially contain more honest, firsthand, and immediate descriptive writing than does any other literary form.

However, while it is tempting to search private journals for straightforward personal history, it is dangerous to take their contents at face value. Diaries document what a woman wrote. One should not assume, however, that the author explains herself or her experiences with any unique guarantee of objectivity or accuracy. It is well established that the diarist may not be completely forthright in her writing for a variety of personal reasons including the audience she expected or feared for her writing, the motivations prompting her to write, and other such factors that may limit full personal disclosure.

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1. This article uses the terms "diary" and "journal" interchangeably to refer to collections of writing in which the diarist records information on a regular basis. The article differentiates "personal" diaries or journals, meaning those focused on the writer's experiences, from those journals used for accounts, records, or listings of other kinds.



This is the diary of
Mrs. Ella Blume, wife
of August Blume, from
Oct. 4, 1895 to Feb. 16, 1898.

Name, Mrs. Ella Blume
FROM
October 4 1895
TO
1898

Current social constructionist theory would suggest further complications in the process of interpreting women's diaries by arguing that the "self" of any individual is not fully autonomous, coherent, or fixed, waiting to be discovered by the careful researcher. Rather, the self of each woman diarist is continuously forged in the interplay among her, her social environment, and the standards of propriety set by any historical and contemporaneous community of diarists with which she is familiar and to which she then belongs. Feminist scholars who espouse social constructionist perspectives count female gender role conditioning as one of the most influential of all environmental forces relevant to these studies.²

In short, the authors whom diary readers want to know are only partially available through any given words of their personal journals. Nevertheless, lacking other sources for the information they seek, some historians have explored new approaches to the diaries in search of the true self of the author behind her words. The most successful of these explorers have widened their definitions of "texts" that are relevant to the study. They have moved beyond the narrative entries of personal diaries to include nonnarrative segments, and beyond the personal diary to include the ledgers, registers, and other journals that address the "story" of a life less directly. Some researchers have also begun to include in their analyses the material nature of the

books themselves. As each of these sources is analyzed, the social context of the writing remains a constant reference.³ Later in this article, the three frontier diaries of a nineteenth-century Kansan, Sarah Ella Miner Blume, will be used to demonstrate the value of integrating intertextual and material analyses in detecting otherwise hidden personal characteristics of a diarist. First, however, a brief survey of some related research issues is in order.

Although historians and literary scholars have developed sophisticated methods of textual analysis for use in diary study, many have lamented the inherent obstacles they face in understanding the nineteenth-century woman.⁴ The primary barrier is the noncommittal, circumscribed style of most of these journal writers. A diarist may have omitted direct descriptions of her emotions or motivations as a result of her own low literacy level and degree of self-knowledge. The present or future audience that she imagined for her

writing may have also influenced her content choices. However, even in journals intended to be private, the nature of the information revealed was also affected by the extent of the author's internalization of her culture's nearly relentless pressure toward actions appropriate to "women's sphere."⁵ While recent scholarship shows that the actual division between women's and men's spheres of activities did not follow the strict separation recommended in the popular literature of the day, those prescribed ideals were nevertheless felt as pressures toward "proper" gender behavior. The literary conventions deemed suitable for women's diaries supported society's other behavioral directives until, as Vera Norwood writes, "what [women] say in diaries and journals is as much a reflection of how much they think they should say as it is of what they actually feel."⁶ In fact, since contemporaneous records of society's guidelines for women are far more plentiful than any public documentation of women's lived realities, the differentiation between gender role prescriptions and women's actual behavior has presented historians one of their most basic challenges.

Diary research can overcome the obstacles of women writers' reticence and role conformity to some degree by combining an analysis of typical narrative patterns in a sample of private personal diaries with a historically-informed, twentieth-century

2. Cynthia Gannett, "The Book and the Writer: The Convergence of Composition Studies, Social Constructionism, and Feminist Criticism," *Gender and the Journal: Diaries and Academic Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1-18.

3. The best example of this type of integrative research approach published to date is Laurel Ulrich's Pulitzer Prize winning *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

4. Vera Norwood, "Women's Place: Continuity and Change in Response to Western Landscapes," in *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, ed. Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 155-81; Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth-Century Diarists and Twentieth-Century Grief Theories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Harriet Blodgett, *Centuries of Days: Englishwomen's Private Diaries* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 11-12; Donna C. Stanton and Jeanine F. Plottel, eds., *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

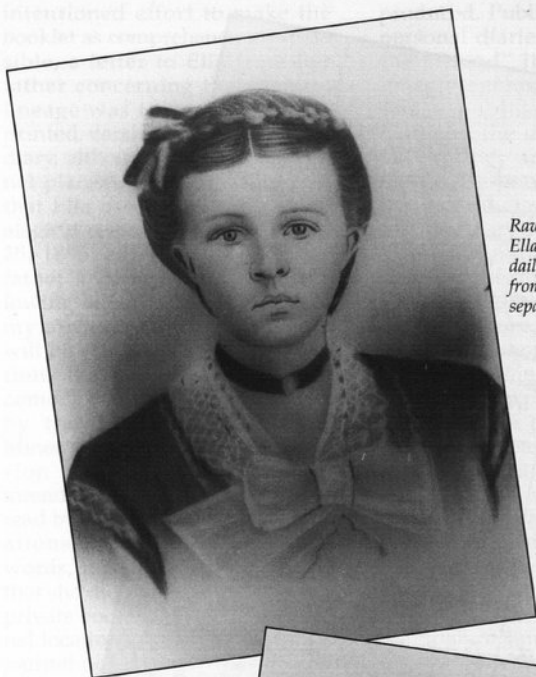
5. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74; Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

6. Norwood, "Women's Place," 163.

empathy, in order to reach conclusions about women's lives.⁷ However, these investigations reach an impasse in their efforts to know details of an individual woman's experiences.

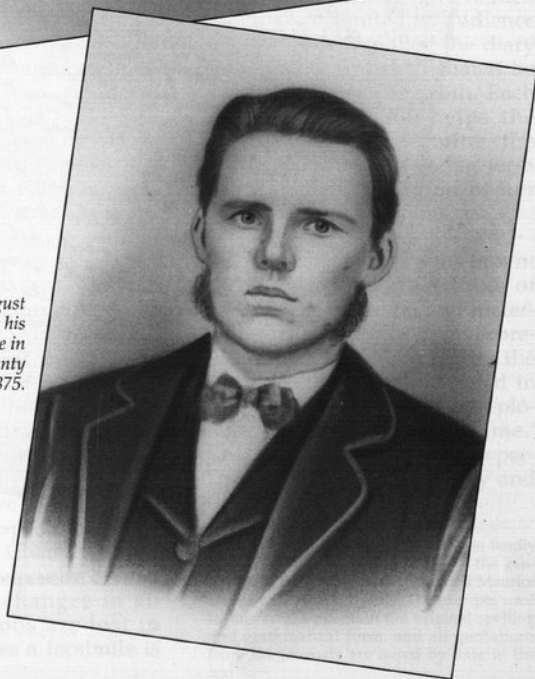
While it is reasonable to begin any personal diary research with a probing textual analysis of the narrative entries, the study should not stop there. As will be seen in the Ella Blume examples to follow, an intertextual approach that encompasses all extant private writings can supply further insights into the writer's personality and values than can any single-text perspective. Furthermore, the full context of the entries is important to interpretation as they interact with both the diary's non-narrative contents and with the physical characteristics of the books in which they are contained. Although they are often overlooked, the material qualities of the books are especially meaningful because diaries as objects acquire extraordinary status in their authors' lives. Witness those women who lock or hide their diaries, who rescue them from a fire or flood's threat of ruin before most other possessions, or who specify the disposal of the books in their wills. As the pages of a diary evolve from mere writing surfaces to a literal embodiment of life's progression, the collected writing becomes a souvenir, uniquely treasured for its power to evoke the author's private past.

Therefore, the special significance of all types of diaries, both

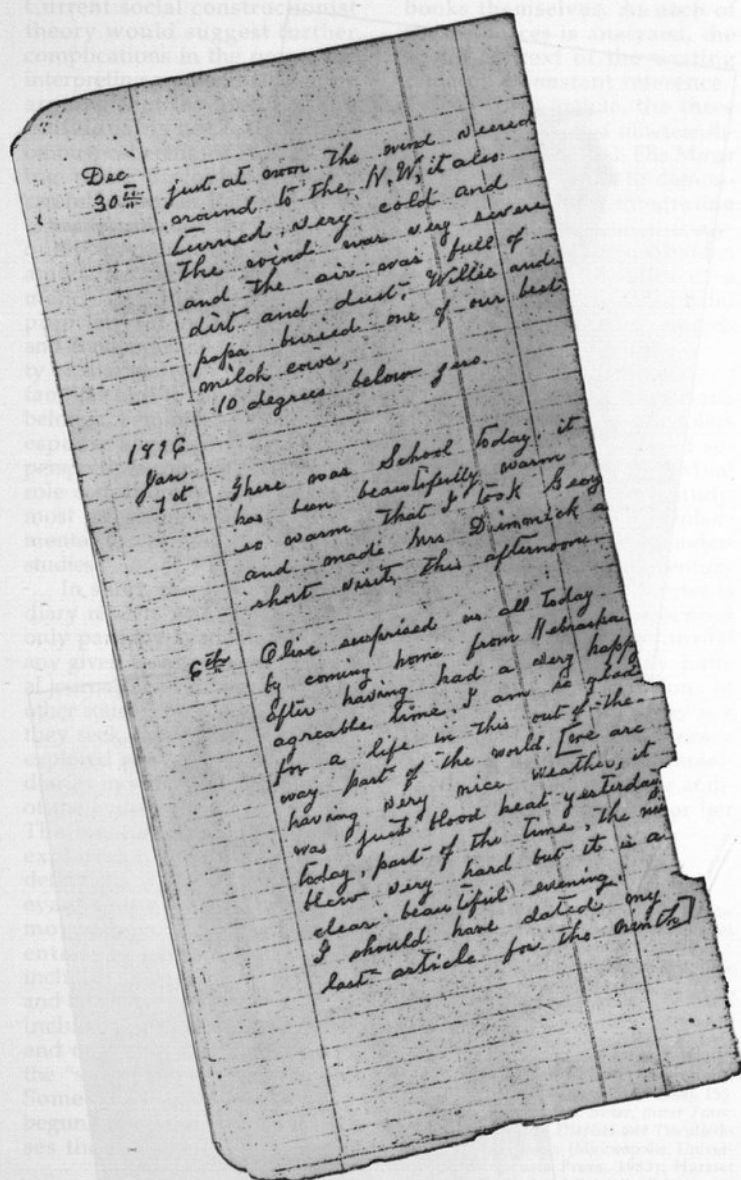


Rawlins County pioneer Ella Blume recorded the daily events of her life from 1879 to 1906 in three separate journals.

Ella's husband, August Blume, brought his family to settle in Rawlins County in 1875.



7. Gayle R. Davis, "Women's Frontier Diaries: Writing for Good Reason," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14 (1987): 5-14; Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears*.



Entries from Ella Blume's personal diary.

as artifacts and as histories, demands investigative methods that combine textual analysis with an object-oriented, extra-narrative search for meaning. The part of the text that is not focused on personal expression and the "unverbalized" acts of diary-keeping are less immediately revealing and therefore less self-consciously chosen by the author than are the words of the personal entries. The nonpersonal and material attributes of a journal are not as controlled by the author's relative propensity for introspection and self-disclosure, her literacy, or her social conditioning to fear a future harsh readership if she transgresses appropriate gender role lines. Therefore, they are likely to serve as unmitigated signs of the author's attitudes and values.

That such attention to the material characteristics and significance of the books as artifacts is notably missing from much diary interpretation is illogical but not surprising. The study of diaries has typically been associated with literary scholars who are trained to put full faith in textual analysis. Furthermore, from a practical standpoint, any study of a diary's nonnarrative aspects requires that the researcher work from the original book. It is obvious that primary documents are ideal in any research, but in the case of diaries, this requirement for original sources is especially problematic.

First is the issue of ready accessibility. Women's personal diaries are relatively rare in historical archives, since the private documents traditionally given the highest priority have been those of public figures, usually males of the dominant racial and ethnic group. Recently, however, the value of the personal narra-

tives that document the lives of ordinary men and women has been increasingly recognized, even if other forms of private writing such as accounts ledgers are seldom carefully kept.

A second, greater research problem is that many extant journals are in the private hands of the diarist's descendants. In family storage, loose portions or separate volumes of the diaries are commonly lost or purposely divided among the heirs, preventing or complicating their study. Some owners find the books so precious that they are reluctant to permit outsiders to read them. For others, the books are so personal that their use is allowed only after editing has protected the family's privacy. Owners whose fragile diaries are deteriorating beyond complete legibility often transcribe the journal entries so that the original need not be handled. While this practice will help preserve the manuscript, if those are the only versions made available to outside scholars, it is stifling to thorough diary research.

When an editor corrects grammatical or spelling errors or rearranges the contents to achieve a more uniform or linear progression of ideas, even those changes may inadvertently conceal interpretive clues found in the original. An example related to the treatment of Ella Blume's diaries will illustrate this point. Following the logic that personal diaries are the most interesting of all private writings, the Rawlins County Historical Society transcribed Ella's personal diary, rather than the other extant journals, as a booklet for regional distribution.⁸ In the editors' well-

intentioned effort to make the booklet as comprehensive as possible, a letter to Ella from her father concerning their family lineage was transcribed in the printed version of her personal diary, although the letter's original placement was in a journal that Ella used in part for genealogical records. Ella's December 25, 1895, entry introduced her father's information: "The following letter as to the origin of my sir name and antecedents will be of interest to the generations that are, and that are to come." The impression created by the displacement of Mr. Miner's letter in the booklet version of the diary is that Ella intended her personal diary to be read by present and future generations of her family. In other words, this leads one to believe that she did not see the diary as a private book. However, the original location of the letter within a journal not primarily designated as a personal diary indicates that Ella kept her commitment to recording family history for posterity while preserving the possibility of privacy for her personal diary. Since the question of audience is important to diary interpretation, this printed version of the personal diary is somewhat misleading.

Even when a journal's entries themselves are unedited, copied or published diaries are virtually always compressed for efficient use of space, eliminating the blank sections, drawings, marginal "doodles," interior titling or labeling of the contents, or other nonnarrative indications of the author's perspective on her life and writing. Changes in the handwriting style which may signal various changes in an author's emotions are lost in publication unless a facsimile is

produced. Published versions of personal diaries rarely describe the "found" items the author loosely enclosed in her book. These publications typically focus on the diary's narrative line, so they are edited to omit repetitive entries that seem not to advance the diary's story.

Secondary versions of diaries are also inadequate for this research because they do not describe the physical attributes authors chose for their books. Whether the journal is commercial or homemade, the type of book used, its particular binding, the absence or presence of a decorative or protective covering or a fastening device to restrict access, all are meaningful. If the information is available, the way the diarist treated the book and the extent to which she made it available to other readers are also important. She may have hidden the book or limited its audience in another way, willed the diary to someone or asked that it be published after her death. Each decision she made helps the researcher to determine the diarist's perspective on her writing and the likelihood of her complete candor therein.

This article's argument for the crucial role of intertextual and material approaches to diary interpretation may be illustrated by the analytic challenges presented in the three journals of Kansas pioneer Sarah Ella Miner Blume.⁹ College-educated Ella kept a personal diary, a family history and

8. *No Footsteps to Follow: The diary of Ella Miner Blume, The first woman in Rawlins County, Kansas*, introduction by Ruth Kelley Hayden (no impr.).

9. Access to these journals and to family photographs was made possible by the generosity of the Blume family, through Maurice Blume of St. Francis, Kans. The excerpts used in this article maintain the original spelling and grammatical form, and all quotations from the journals are noted by date in the text.

weather record, and an income accounts book during various periods from 1879 to 1906. Ella sometimes wrote concurrently in two of the three volumes. Each of Ella's diaries was ostensibly initiated to organize part of her extraordinarily varied responsibilities for household finances, farming, social obligations, and the maintenance of family history. However, one of Ella's overriding private motives for writing all of her diaries was to record her own life. Comments on her experiences appear not only in the personal diary, but also scattered through the other two journals. The resulting mixture of topics, the organization of the contents, the items loosely enclosed, and the physical attributes of the journals provide clues that augment and even modify information Ella wrote in the personal diary entries concerning her emotions and values. Three examples found in Ella's writing will demonstrate the central point: that a multidimensional perspective can enhance and refine a narrowly defined textual analysis and result in a closer understanding of Ella's personality, behavioral motivations, and responses to her life.

A brief outline of Ella's history in Kansas will furnish the proper context for the analysis of the diary excerpts to follow. Ella was the first woman to settle in present-day Rawlins County, in extreme northwest Kansas. She and her husband, August, with their three-year-old son Willie and infant daughter Olive, arrived in Kansas from Crete, Nebraska, on June 7, 1875. They paid fourteen dollars to claim their quarter section of land under the Homestead Act of 1862. There they built a dugout shelter in the bank of Beaver

Creek near what is now Ludell, Kansas. By 1879 there were two thousand claims in the county, including those of a core of fellow Nebraskans who had come to the region on August's recommendation during the land rush. By 1884 Ludell supported twenty businesses.¹⁰ August and Ella lived there, through the birth of three more sons, Carl, Rex and George, for the rest of their lives. Ella died in 1909 of a "telescoped intestine." Her obituary read:

The last pictures that were taken of [Ella] showed that she had worked very, very hard and that it was not an easy life. It has been said she went to sleep like a tired child on August 26, 1909. Her life's work was complete. She died as she lived, highly respected and loved by everyone.¹¹

August died in 1922, also a valued first homesteader and community builder.

Proud of these original settlers, the Rawlins County Historical Society maintains a permanent exhibit of photographs of Ella and August, a file of newspaper clippings, and a collection of letters solicited from their descendants. Some of this information has been collected in the *History of Rawlins County Kansas* and *The Time That Was: The Courageous Acts and Accounts of Rawlins County, Kansas, 1875-1915*. A

10. Ruth Kelley Hayden, *The Time That Was: The Courageous Acts and Accounts of Rawlins County, Kansas, 1875-1915* (Colby, Kans.: H. F. Davis Memorial Library, Colby Community College, 1973), 67.

11. Rawlins County Book Committee, *History of Rawlins County Kansas*, 2 vols. (Atwood, Kans.: Rawlins County Genealogical Society, 1988), 1: 176.

historical marker stands at the site of the original Blume homestead. Area native and artist Rudolph Wendelin chose Ella and August as the central figures in his 28-by-9-foot centennial celebration mural. The painting, housed in the historical society building, depicts the first settlers against the backdrop of their covered wagon, surrounded by images from more recent Rawlins County history.

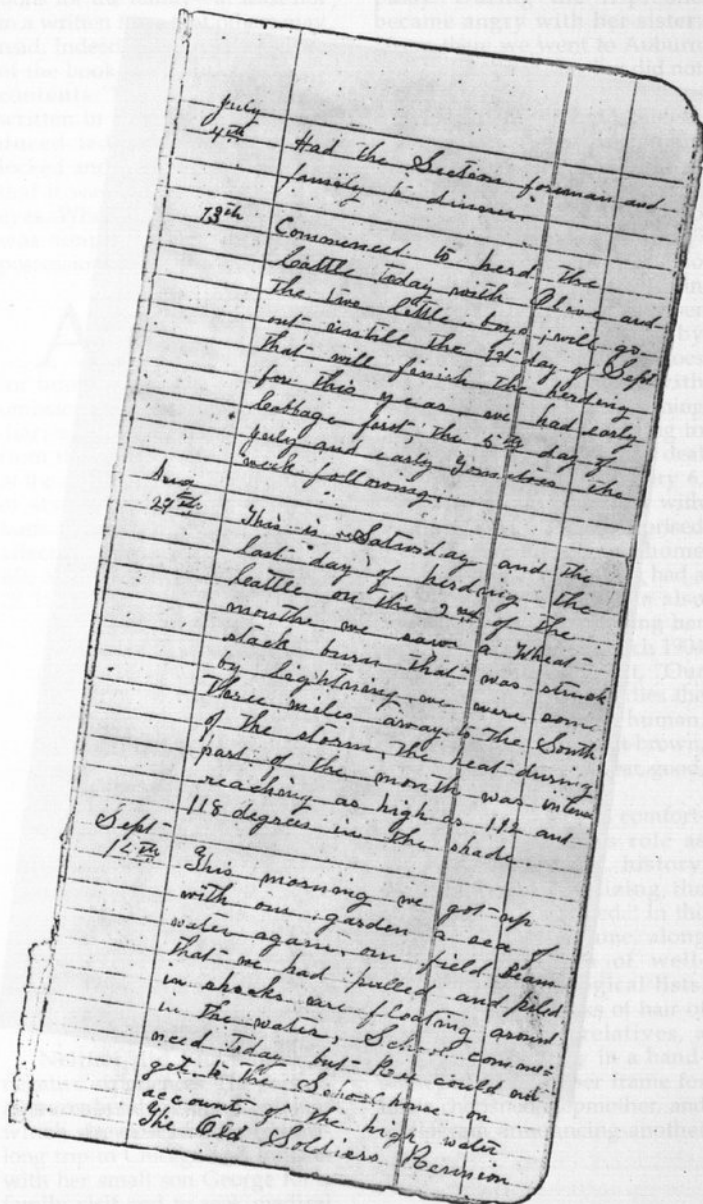
Ella was twenty-three years old, a small and somewhat frail woman, when her family moved to Beaver Creek. Through the years August held many civic posts and public sector jobs that frequently occupied him away from the homestead, and Ella assumed the primary responsibility for the household and children. In addition to maintaining the house and large vegetable and flower gardens, tending the livestock and performing the other routine domestic chores, she earned money for the family in a variety of ways. She washed and ironed clothes and worked as a seamstress for local residents. Until the mid-1880s cowboys driving cattle to Nebraska on the Dodge City Trail one mile west of her home were among her customers for laundry and mending. Ella also sold water to chuck wagon cooks and eggs to the community. Although perhaps harsher than most, Ella's life was typical of rural women's experiences in frontier settlements: increased responsibility combining with the crude living conditions to result in a challenging personal test of will and ability.¹²

12. Susan Armitage, "Women and Men in Western History: A Stereotypical Vision," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 16 (October 1985): 385; Joan M. Jensen, "Cloth, Butter and Boards: Women's Household Production," *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

The first two of the three examples drawn from Ella's writings illustrate that private information about an author's life may be concentrated in personal diaries but it is not confined or even always best represented in that type of journal. In the first example, in fact, the meaning of a topic raised in her personal diary is only clarified when read in conjunction with comments on a stray page of her family/weather volume. The entries in question concern the family's first Kansas home in which they would live for twenty-five years. On November 8, 1895, Ella wrote in her personal diary:

I commenced to clean the house. our house cleaning is not like cleaning a frame house for we live in a dugout and have lived in it for 18 years, there is three rooms and each have a cloth tacked overhead and each room is papered with newspapers, even the cupboards are papered inside as well as outside, so it takes Olive and I a good week to clean all the rooms and call them clean.

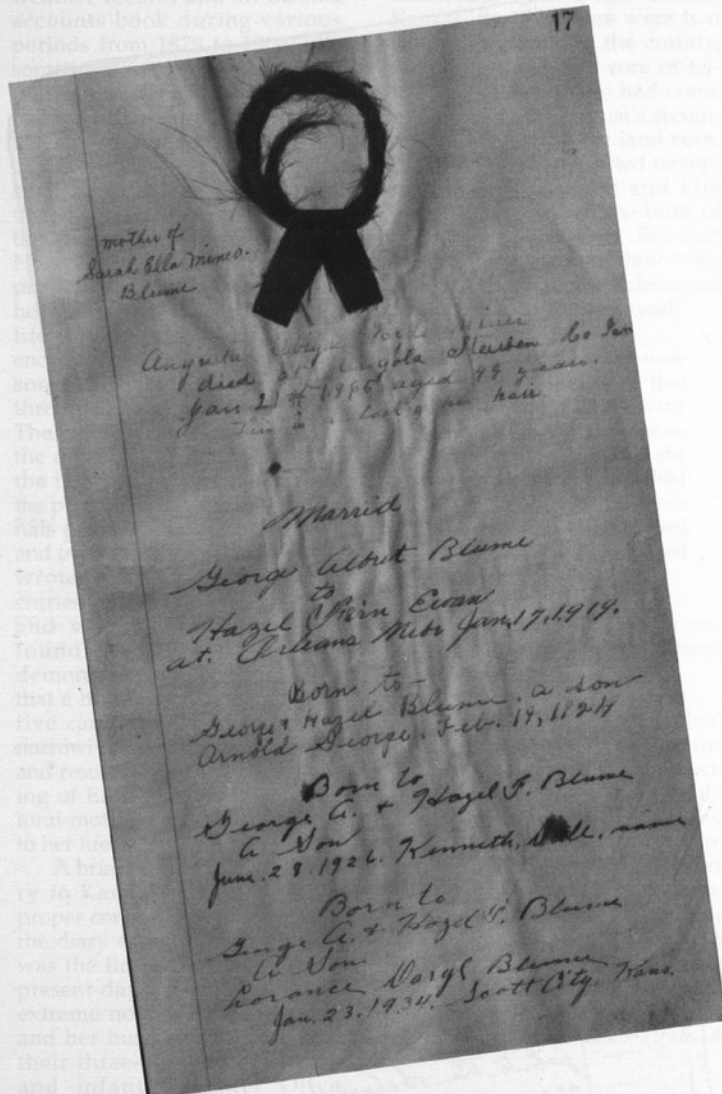
On first reading, this entry seems to be aimed at an uninformed audience that needs a description of the specific cleaning processes she and her daughter used at home. Textual analysis tells us, however, that it is unlike the rest of her writings which are descriptive enough to stir her own memory but which do not contain such physical detail or instructive voice. When the reader understands this entry's unusual tone as meaningful and places it in the context of the family's housing history and Ella's later comments in her family/weather journal, her words



An 1896 page from Ella's personal diary.

weather record, and an income
accounts book during various
periods from 1870 to 1880.

Creek near what is now Turley
in the county
of the
had
and the



Recordings of marriages and births in Ella Blume's family / weather journal.

lose their neutrality and suggest more of a complaint than she intended to divulge. Research into the history of frontier shelter supports the new conclusion.

The Blume house was dug into the east bank of Beaver Creek, with its west wall made of sod blocks, its roof composed of logs covered with soil, and its floor of hardened dirt. The cavern created by digging into the bank was approximately ten feet square. Two other rooms were added over the years as the family grew to seven members. While dugout, sod shelters were common as first housing in the western two-thirds of Kansas, and although the final size of the Blume house was large for such a structure, the family lived in their "first" home far longer than did most midwestern pioneers. Several studies have found that pioneers in North Dakota lived in their sod shelters for five years and that German settlers in Oklahoma averaged seven years before moving to frame houses. In addition, sod dugouts did not stand up to the forces of nature for long periods, particularly not when the house was situated on a creek that periodically overflowed its banks. It was not the first time in the May/June 1902 entries of her family / weather record that Ella noted her home's "floor was covered with water." Studies show that in the harsh climate of North Dakota, literally none of the sod houses survived intact after thirty years.¹³ After

13. John Hudson, "Frontier Housing in North Dakota," *North Dakota History* 42 (Fall 1975): 12; Douglas Hale, *The Germans from Russia in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 47; Andrew Gulliford, "Earth Architecture of the Prairie Pioneer," *The Midwest Review* 8 (Spring 1986): 7; see also Patricia Cox Crews and Ronald C. Naugle, eds., *Nebraska Quilts and Quiltmakers* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1991), 26, 30, for anecdotal evidence concerning the length of time Nebraskans lived in dugouts.

twenty-five years, even assuming regular repairs, one must question whether the Blume house could have been in good condition.

In her personal diary, Ella never signalled her desire to leave the crude living structure. However, on an isolated page of purely personal entries in the family/weather journal, Ella noted with unusual care the details of the final work on the long-awaited new house: "Mr. Unger and Carl finished papering today. That completes the new house" (February 21, 1901). And tucked within the weather record section of that journal, she noted, "we eat our first meal in the new house" (March 17, 1901). These are particularly noticeable as uncharacteristic entries because none of Ella's journals contain similar documentation of the additions or improvements made to her sod home over the years.

If the clue in the change of voice in the personal diary had not been confirmed by these specific and unusual entries, almost hidden out of place in the family/weather journal, it would be logical to see Ella as content in the frugal life-style that their original housing afforded. In light of the later writing, however, the entry describing her cleaning suggests that she was not contented, but that she was a stoic woman of her day. Her choices of what to write on this matter verify Ella's reluctance to use her diaries, even the most personal of them, as places to confide her critical feelings concerning her immediate family, or as a coping mechanism for those frustrations. Although she was not happy with her home, she followed societal expectations not to complain directly about her station in life or criticize her husband regarding his provi-

sions for the family—at least not in a written form that others may read. Indeed, the physical nature of the book does not protect its contents. The personal diary, written in a commercially-produced ledger book, was not locked and there is no evidence that it was hidden from others' eyes. When Ella died, the book was simply found among her possessions left to the family.

A second illustration of the need to go beyond the personal journals for information concerns a near omission in Ella's journals. In her diaries, Ella was relatively free from the repressive conventions of the day that called for minimal or stylized expression of emotions. She often directly stated her affective responses to everyday life, as in this entry of November 28, 1895:

This has been a very jolly day. Mr. Perkins President of the C.B.Q. RR made a great many families feel as if they had something to be thankful for, by presenting Eleven families with a nice Turkey. We were one of the families, I prepared dinner for 18. . . . The little people as well as the young had a jolly good time. There is not much time for any one that does the cooking but to attend to her work, but I enjoyed myself all the same.

Neither did Ella shun the negative experiences. The personal journal ends with an entry in which she described a month-long trip to Chicago and Indiana with her small son George for a family visit and to seek medical attention for a "drooping eyelid," probably a symptom of Bell's

palsy. During the trip, she became angry with her sister: "from there we went to Auburn Ind to visit Sister May but did not stay there as we were not up-to-date enough to suit her." Later in the same entry she wrote, "from there we went back to Auburn I had intended to stay over Sunday but she did not even ask me to so I went back to my Brothers" (February 16, 1898). Ella also vented some of her anxieties in her diary, as she did on December 12, 1895, when Olive went by train to Nebraska: "Olive . . . goes to spend the holidays with friends. . . . I do hope that nothing prevented them from coming to meet her. I would feel a good deal better if I knew." On January 6, 1896, she finished the story with apparent relief: "Olive surprised us all today by coming home from Nebraska after having had a very agreeable time." Ella also seemed direct in expressing her sorrowful feelings. In March 1904 she wrote from her heart, "Our good, faithful, Fido dog dies the 26th. his ways were so human, his Eyes were pretty soft-brown, he was cream white, a dear, good, faithful, watchful dog."

Ella appeared to be comfortable in her woman's role as recorder of family history, including memorializing the members who had died.¹⁴ In the family/weather volume, along with fifteen pages of well-researched genealogical lists, were safely kept locks of hair of several deceased relatives, a newspaper obituary in a hand-scalloped black paper frame for Ella's cherished stepmother, and a telegram announcing another

14. See Martha Pike, "In Memory Of: Artifacts Relating to Mourning in Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of American Culture* 3 (Winter 1980): 642-59.

member's death. These entries and scrapbook contents lull the researcher into concluding that Ella could be depended upon to describe her reactions to life's events, whether happy, angry, worried, or sad. However, when the most tragic death in the Blume family occurred, Ella broke her expressive pattern and remained silent in her journals.

Ella and August's son Henry died "during his birth" on January 2, 1886. In 1975 youngest son George Albert Blume recounted that a record-breaking blizzard at the time of Henry's death had made it impossible to bury him in the frozen ground. August put the boy's body in a homemade casket and stored it in the root cave, agreeing with Ella that the boy would be buried with the first one of them who died. The agreement was kept, and Henry was buried with Ella in 1909, twenty-three years after his own death.¹⁵ A source of sympathy and curiosity among their neighbors, this chilling pact reveals the magnitude of the parents' grief at the death of their newborn, their apparent desire that the child not be buried alone, and probably some degree of denial of the loss.

Ella was not writing in any of her journals during the period when Henry died. However, there were three anniversaries of the loss during the time that she kept the personal diary which would have afforded her the logical, even traditional, opportunity to record her feelings. Nevertheless, the only mention of Henry in Ella's journals is in the family history and weather book. There her infant's name takes its place as the first on the page of

"Deaths" in the family. Ella apparently chose to cope with this trauma in part by being silent in her journal narratives.¹⁶ Perhaps there is a clue to Ella's feelings about Henry's death in the back pages of her income accounts book. There she laboriously copied, from back to front on the last six pages, the lyrics of twelve long verses of a song. The first two verses and presumably the title are missing on lost pages. Its morose message cautioned against a mortal's pride, reminding the reader that death levels all. The entry date of the lyrics is unknown, but no entries in this ledger are recorded between the years 1883 and 1896, so it seems clear that this exercise was not part of her immediate mourning process over Henry. We can only surmise that the song's stoic message was part of the value system that guided Ella in coping with grief. Even lacking further details, without knowledge of Henry's death, made more poignant to modern readers by Ella's reaction to the loss, an understanding of this author's life is significantly less complete.

A third example from Ella's writing emphasizes the value of preserving and examining the extraneous materials a diarist may have enclosed in her diaries. Although Ella was aware of her place in history, frequently using her writing to mark the passage of time since she settled in Kansas, a momentous event in her life went nearly unmentioned in her journals. In this case, a newspaper article loosely inserted in the weather journal supplies the proof of her omission.

The October 23, 1879, issue of the *Atwood Pioneer* contained this unusual, if condescending, tribute to a pioneer woman: "Mrs. Bella [sic] Blume, wife of August C. Blume, is one of the bravest little women that ever settled in this great Commonwealth. She was here during the raid, and, prior to that awful time, was often months alone on her claim, while the honest husband was away from home working for bread and meat to sustain his little family."¹⁷

The newspaper article clarifies two passing comments Ella had written, one among her laundry lists in the income accounts book and a second in her personal diary. In the middle of the laundry records of 1879 to 1881, under the account labeled "Lewis," Ella wrote, "connected with the Indian raid of 1878 the fault was his that he did not let the settlers know of the danger." Considering that Ella and her children were fortunate to survive the raid, it is surprising that she was not more judgmental in this expression of her view. Ella also referred to the attack in her personal diary (January 31, 1896) when she neutrally mentioned a person who had been killed in the violence.

The raid of 1878 was the culmination of a series of aggressive acts between the region's Cheyenne Indians and the white settlers and soldiers.¹⁸ When the Cheyennes attacked the new set-

17. Hayden, *The Time That Was*, 14.

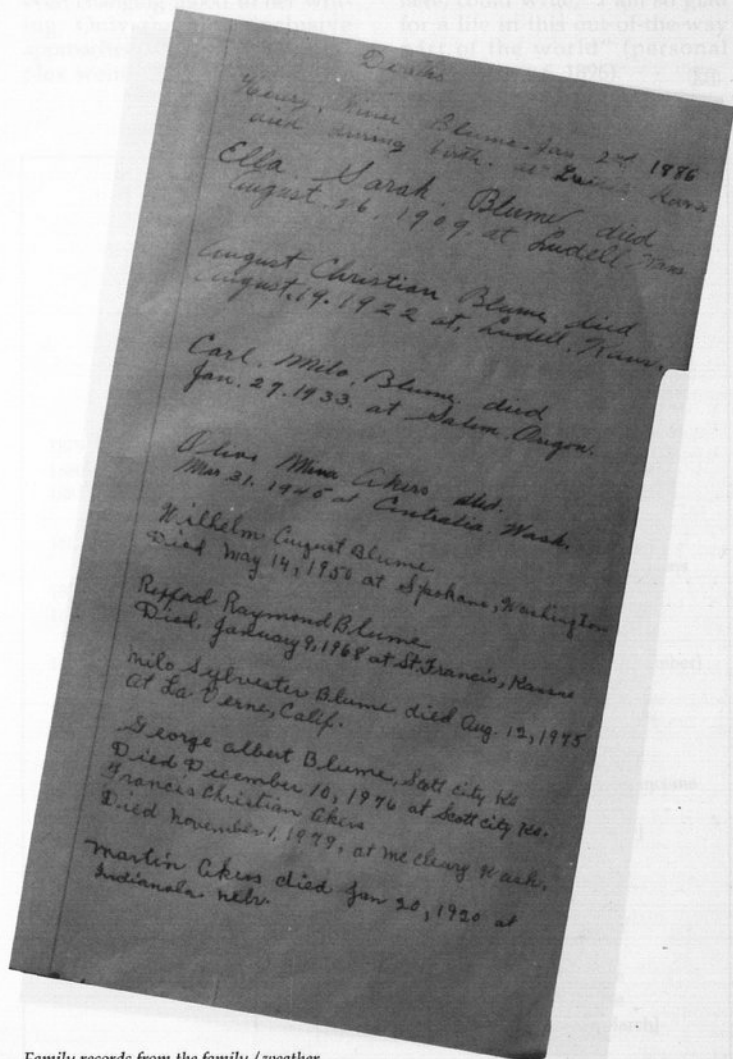
18. *Ibid.*, 8-11, 22-31. For further information on the Cheyenne conflict, see Ramon Powers, "The Northern Cheyenne Trek Through Western Kansas in 1878: Frontiersmen, Indians, and Cultural Conflict," *The Trail Guide* 16 (September-December 1972): 2-35; Ramon Powers, "Why the Northern Cheyenne Left Indian Territory in 1878: A Cultural Analysis," *Kansas Quarterly* 3 (Fall 1971): 72-81; Mari Sandoz, *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953; reprint, New York: Avon Books, 1964).

15. G.A. Blume to Rawlins County Historical Society, March 6, 1975.

16. Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears*, 12.

tlements along Beaver Creek, twenty-six-year-old Ella and her three children, all under the age of five years, were at home alone. As previously mentioned, being responsible for the homestead was routine for Ella. From 1875 to 1878, August walked the 220 miles back to their former home in Crete, Nebraska, to support his family financially by working for the railroad. He made this seven-day trip in the spring and returned in the fall. The Cheyenne attack on October 1 found August still in Nebraska. Although some neighbors were killed in the raid, Ella and her children were unharmed. Some say that Ella was gathering corn to feed her pigs when the Cheyennes saw her, thought she was a decoy to lure them into firing range, and left without attacking. Others surmise that Ella and the children were saved because the Indians were unable to see the house as they approached from the east, the house carved as it was in the east bank of the creek.

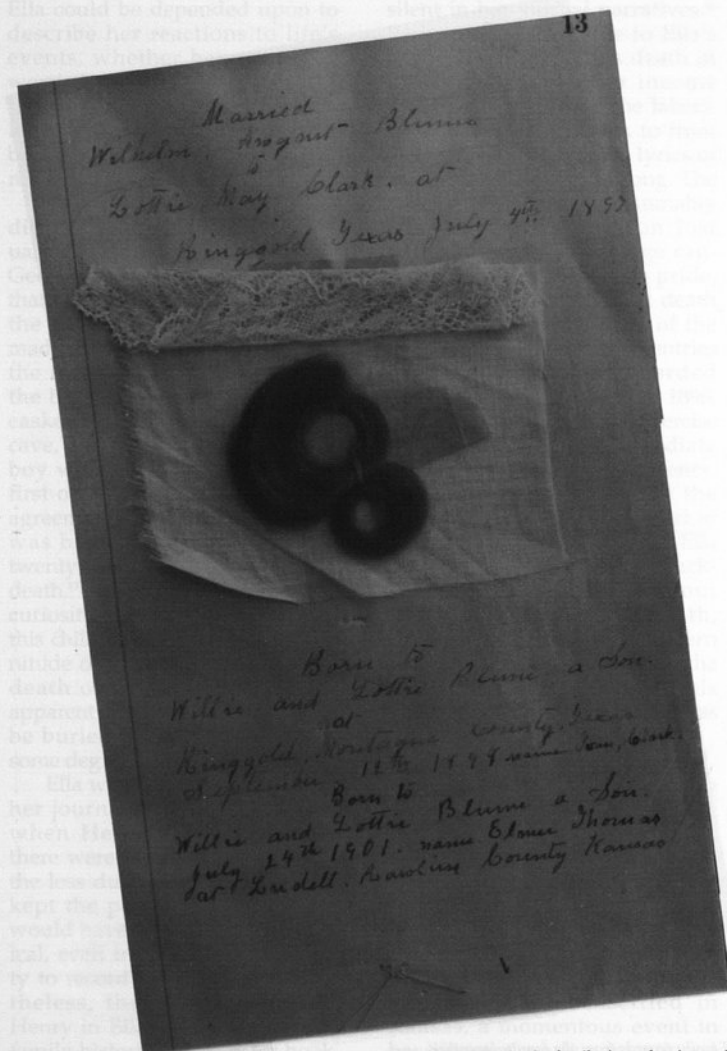
In spite of her virtual avoidance of the subject, Ella's involvement in the raid earned her a heroine's reputation in the community. One might understand her failure to fully describe this harrowing experience in her journals as an indication that she did not want to remember and relive it. However, the fact that she saved the article suggests that the community's notice of her courageous role in the raid diminished her need to record it herself and allowed her to maintain suitable womanly modesty concerning this incident. In any case, prideful or not, the presence of the article in the diary demonstrates one of Ella's personal motives for keeping her journals—to save her own history. As historian Harriet Blodgett writes:



Family records from the family / weather journal. Note the first entry is the 1886 death of Ella and August's son Henry.

member's death. These entries and scraps of contents tell the researcher into concluding that Ella could be depended upon to describe her reactions to these events, whether they were

"Deaths" in the family. Ella apparently chose to cope with this trauma in part by being silent in the family / weather journal.



Family entries in the family / weather journal.

From record book to confidante, the diary is functional. Its peculiar value for women, however, lies not in its application but in its nature as a personal record, a book of self. The diarist who has inscribed herself in its pages has claimed time for herself and momentarily freed herself from being an object in a male-dominated world rather than a subject in her own right. She has, of course, also shown why diaries continue to exist: the tenacity of the human desire to matter personally.¹⁹

It is logical to surmise that Ella felt a sense of importance and achievement as she wrote her several journals, books that symbolized her various competencies in her pioneer role. Married to a founding father of the county and faced with women's subordinate, primarily private roles in the culture of the day, Ella chose to leave her diaries as a mark of her own impressive contributions.

Ella Blume's journals challenge the skills of the contemporary researcher to uncover the meaning behind both her specific idiosyncrasies and her culturally-approved reticence. Far-ranging approaches such as those suggested in this article are needed throughout the field of diary research whenever materials are available for the study. It is clear that surviving nineteenth-century diaries represent a minority of women and that much information about the lives of the rest is irretrievably lost. Fortunately, the growing recognition of the

13. G. A. Winters to Keweenaw County Historical Society, March 6, 1972.

14. Blodgett, *Centuries of Days*, 85-86.

19. Blodgett, *Centuries of Days*, 85-86.

importance of women's private writings has led to more careful conservation of all types of such documents. Now it is crucial that historians explore existing documentation to the fullest extent, reconstructing as much of these women's lives as possible from the available clues.

Although Ella's journals, kept by her family and the supplemental information amassed by the Rawlins County Historical Society, exemplify particularly rich collections of information, the research methods proposed here would be applicable to any diaries. Just as narrative patterns have been discerned at this stage of diary interpretation, in the future so should patterns of non-narrative and material qualities of the journals be noted, studied, and incorporated into explorations of a diarist's construction of meaning. As Jules Prown writes, "although the study of artifacts is only one route to the understanding of culture, it is a special, important, and qualitatively different route. An investigation that ignores material culture will be impoverished."²⁰ The more often the conclusions that are drawn from all possible textual and material perspectives are tested against each other, the more likely we will be able to interpret the writings accurately.

Recent women's history scholarship has shown irrefutably that there was no one response among nineteenth-century women to the move west, to the sparsely populated land, or to the hard work of new settlement. Each person brought a different particular mixture of personality, age, back-

ground, spiritual perspective, family and community status, even changing mood to her writing. Only the most inclusive approaches can uncover the complex women behind these jour-

nals, women like Ella Blume who, in spite of the trials mentioned here, could write, "I am so glad for a life in this out-of-the-way part of the world" (personal diary, January 6, 1896). (KH)

Dates and Contents of Ella Blume's Journals

Personal Diary	Family/Weather	Income Accounts
	[Undated listings of real estate holdings acquired after 1881; undated family history records, probably begun in 1895.]	
1879		laundry income
1880		laundry income
1881		laundry income [ends in July]
1882		family events/ sewing instructions
1883-1894	[no entries in the three journals]	
1895	[begins in October] family events	
1896	family events	[begins in December] egg income egg income egg income
1897	family events	
1898	family events [ends on February 16]	
1899		laundry, egg income
1900	weather/family events	egg income [ends in May]
1901	weather/family events	
1902	weather/family events	
1903	weather/family events	egg income
1904	weather/family events [ends in March]	egg income
1905		egg income
1906		egg income [ends in March]

20. Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," in *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 22.