

American Frontier Soundscapes: Rehearing the Old West

By Phylis Johnson

The American Soundscape

Our journey starts on the East Coast in the mid 1800s. Henry David Thoreau's cabin was nestled among the Concord, Massachusetts' woods less than one quarter mile away from the Fitchburg Railroad stop. The train crossed near the southern tip of the pond, and its morning arrival was often cloaked by its own billowing clouds of smoke and the woods that stood between society and Thoreau (1884: "Solitude"):

I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself; a distant view of the railroad where it touches the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland road on the other. But for the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the *prairies* [*Italics added*]. It is as much Asia or Africa as New England. I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself.

For Thoreau, daily soundscapes became the soundtracks to his life. He could only imagine the sounds beyond his *hearing range*, as his mind wandered from Walden to the American frontier in the passages above. The New Englander of his time was as fascinated with the West, as those who would later experience it through film, television and radio. The sound of horses, hawks, insects, and dust storms provided an undercurrent, albeit subconscious, of sound that served as an acoustic reference point in the early days of media, locating the listener within a particular geography – imagined or real. The sounds of the West are composed of the often ignored, but always present, soundtrack that accompanies daily life. Consider how R. Murray Schafer (1977: 76) contextualizes the arrival of the train as a symbolic note of change across America:

...Whenever Noise is granted immunity from human intervention, there will be found a seat of power...thus enabling the railroads to establish themselves more emphatically as the "conquerors"...The train would become the link between the mapped nature trail (representing the known) and the ancient human desire toward exploration and conquest of the frontier.

The low, powerful whistle of the North American train that crossed the Western frontier is noted by Schafer (1977: 81):

The train's whistle was the most important sound in the frontier town, the solo announcement of contact with the outside world. It was the stop clock of the elementary community, as predictable and reassuring as the church bell. In those days, trains spoke to the heart of every man, and small boys came to greet the panting engine.

Trains were the clock keepers and the bells of society: "The church bell, as with the train, is an icon of civilization – although far more ancient" (Schafer, 1977: 54) Thoreau in his chapters, *Sound and Solitude*, gave us a platform upon which to begin to hear sound within the unfolding expansion and industrialization of America. Schafer helps us to understand the significance of sound within American (and all) culture.



Photo: Phylis Johnson

Definition of Sound Culture

By the turn of the 20th century, the Old West had become romanticized as a place of adventure, heroism, and individualism. The rise of the motion picture, radio and television industries would propel this myth. Carolyn Merchant (1980; 2003) has discussed how perception has shaped our framing of the environment and the very image of the Old West has been conceptualized in masculine terms.

In a sense, the dusty wind-torn frontier terrain, the steam from the locomotives, and the billowing and puffing smokestacks of the factories deafened listeners from noting the disappearing soundscapes of a wilder America. Nineteenth century travel journalist Sarah Margaret Fuller exclaimed that there was little time for reflection among this new breed of frontiers people. The nation was in the mood to claim and conquer nature as well as their fears of outlaws, hunger, and sickness.

Neil Evernden (1992) presents a view of nature as a social construction that is held captive by those who attempt to tame it through definition. Thomas Dunlap (2004), in *Faith in Nature*, calls attention to Euro-American writers who mistakenly propelled the myth of individualism during the time when the ideals of frontiers people were colliding with ambitions of an increasingly industrialized society. Max Oelschlaegger (1993), William Cronan (1996), and others have wrestled with man's place in nature and the idea of wilderness, and it seems upon retrospection that individuals did not conquer the West as much as did communities of settlers. Emily Thompson (2002: 1–2) demarcates this transitional era from the Old West to industrialization as pivotal to the making of the "soundscape of

modernity,” which might be thought of as a unique culture of listening that began at the turn of the 20th century (also see Sterne 2003).

At this time, media soon began to reinterpret the past through present technologies – film, radio, and television. *The Great American Train Robbery* (1903) debuted at the turn of the 20th century, and other silent films soon followed. Grandiose frontier legends were being re-conceptualized from literature and comic books to the big screen. Motion pictures, and soon radio and television, began to reinvent Western legends, scenery and in some cases soundscapes. Much of what we perceive the American frontier to have sounded like is based on constructed soundscapes we have heard in movies and radio shows. Diaries, letters and journals from travelers in wagon trains to the elite observations of journalists and writers such as Fuller and Thoreau lend themselves to a fairly authentic sonic portrayal of the Old West. And that is the precisely the intent of this essay, to rehear the American frontier.

Hearing Western Expansion

The free spirit of the horse and its rider encountered the heavy rhythm of the train and industrialization – a downbeat that offered entrance into mass culture. U.S. industrialization, particularly 1890–1930, produced a new type of modern noise that challenged prior ways of interpreting life through one’s sonic environment. The train, as icon, became a sonic reference point on the plains and across urban regions, both East and West. This noise became assimilated into the soundscape of society (Attali 1985; Thompson 2002). Fuller (1844: 18) writes of her dismay about the new immigrants’ “inability” or unwillingness to appreciate the beauty of nature, aside from its material value. That was particularly true of the settlers in the Upper Midwest. Fuller’s 1844 edition of *Summer on the Lakes* logs her travels through Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois, and she documents the sounds of conversations, against a backdrop of steamships and natural surroundings.

Fuller documented a new America challenged by wilderness and inescapable industrialization. She was the first woman on staff at the New York *Tribune*. Fuller was a pioneer reporter of this new frontier, and eventually became the first U.S. foreign and war woman correspondent. Biographies on Fuller describe her as a transcendentalist and feminist. Her first recorded stop at Niagara on June 10, 1843 indicated an awareness of the larger cultural soundscape that surrounded and encompassed the physical environment:

The perpetual trampling of the waters seized my senses. I felt that no other sound, however near, could be heard, and would start and look behind me for a foe. I realized the identity of that mood of nature in which these waters were poured down with such absorbing force, with that in which the Indian was shaped on the same soil. (Fuller 1844: 5)

She struggled to shake off imbedded stereotypes from her New England upbringing and found wisdom in a river that “seem[ed] to whisper mysteries the thundering voice [of the waterfall] above could not proclaim” (p. 6). She recasts the natural beauty and intellect of women, they being in a similar predicament to nature, as comparatively underappreciated and silenced by frontier men (and likewise dismissed by many frontier women). Immigrants and settlers came to the Midwest to claim a material freedom: “To a person of unspoiled tastes, the beauty alone would afford stimulus

enough” (p. 59). Thoreau would read of Fuller’s summer travels in 1843, and then self publish *Walden* nearly ten years later. Thoreau heard the train as a signal or warning of modernization and expansion encroaching upon personal Waldens across the nation.

It is interesting that Thoreau’s discussion of the Fitchburg train is heavily concentrated in the chapter “Sound” of *Walden*. Thoreau sensed a power that emanated from the “iron horse” that raced swiftly, howling, across towns and countryside. In his last months of his life, Thoreau moved to Minnesota to hear the Old West first hand. He died in 1862. For Thoreau and Fuller, nature and machine blended into composition.



Chronicles of Wagon Women

In Sarah Raymond Herndon’s 1865 diary *Days on the Road: Crossing the Plains*, she describes a soundscape fueled by restlessness, ambition, and bullets. Herndon, 21, took turns “driving the horses” with her mother and the hard ride would take its toll on her ears and patience (Herndon 2003: 32): “There is such a sameness to our surroundings that we seem to be stopping in the same

place every night, with the same neighbors in front and back of us, and across the corral,” She began to enjoy even the simplest of sounds, like being awakened by the “sweet” music of the morning bugle (p. 32). She looked forward to the singing and instrument playing that would sometimes accompany the night rest stop in the midst of the solemn prairie and vast wilderness. Listening and then writing what they heard were often the only ways that women could express their emotions. The diaries of women became popular reading among other women, and it is in this way we can hear the emergence of a female Western voice.

Diaries and letters from frontier women presented a tale set in a picturesque landscape that whispered danger – such beauty was accompanied by the “song of the locusts” (Stewart 1998: 20): the “sound of the dashing, roaring water” invited travelers to move forward carefully. The “road, being so muddy” and “full of ruts” made it nearly impossible to converse on the stagecoach, according to homesteader Elinore Priutt Stewart (p. 4): “the stage acted as if it had the hiccoughs and made us talk as though we were affected in the same way.” Frontier women could not escape nature, so they admired it as a worthy partner and sometimes opponent. In the winter, Stewart (1998: 33), upon seeing the white blanket outside her window, writes, “I could hardly remember where I was when I awoke, and I could almost here [sic] the silence. Not a tree moaned, not a branch seemed to stir...Such a snowstorm I never saw.”

In a letter to the editor of *Kansas’ Junction City Union* (dated July 28, 1875), Angie Brigham Mitchell, 21, shares observations regarding her travels from Kansas to Arizona, particularly commenting on the fierce weather along the Arkansas Plains (Holmes 2000: 13–14):

The greater part of the showers come in the night, and sometimes catch us unprepared. At such time there is a general gathering up of beds that have been spread in the open air, and a hasty retreating to the “big tent.” The camp resounds with calls of “Turn out boys, make the tents fast!” “Cover the wagons” etc., and then echoes of mattocks and tent-pins, and shouts can be heard for a long distance. Last night we had three showers, but our canvas houses afforded an excellent protection, as the wind was not high. To-day is very warm,

little air stirring, and the clouds warn us that to-night we may look out for our usual shower... We are about 2,600 higher than Junction City (Kansas) and find at this early day quite a difference in the atmosphere, it being clearer. Sounds can be heard at a greater distance, and one becomes sooner wearied by exercise.

In 1878, from the diary of Mary Riddle, 38, on her way from Iowa to Oregon, we begin to hear the expansive sound of the wagon train, and sense how quickly the disposition of travelers change as they weary from hunger, thirst, and long harsh soundscapes across the bumpy terrain (Holmes 2000). Men fighting nature and hunger (“bullets...like hail”) as well as each other (“quarrelling”) emerge as part of the Western soundscape. We hear the implied sounds from 17 wagons that follow along mostly silent rails. Ironically, the wagon train follows the rail tracks. Lucy Clark Allen, 37, adds voices to this sonic layering in the documentation of her wagon train ride from Minnesota to Montana during 1881. She writes on hearing rowdy men not too far from her camp, with their voices accompanied by sounds of gunfire (for sport or as a response to libations, she does not know for sure) (Holmes, 2000). Other women writers also mentioned that some men needed little provocation to shoot at each other.

We also begin to hear sound as a battle cry, as sojourners sense victory behind the metaphorical storms that they confront daily, along with the real ones that pop up with little warning. The thunderstorm, with its boisterous voice pounding on the wagon canvas, was a common theme in women’s diaries, including that of Allen (Holmes 2000: 141–2):

It was of course impossible to sleep, and I could hear above the thunder and the torrent of rain on the cover, the voices of the girls singing to the tops of their voices, and they kept it up, they and the rain until morning.

At one point along her travels, Allen rides on the train through a storm. She writes during the noon day in a late May entry, while crossing the Badlands:

... It seemed as if we were going through places just wide enough for the train to pass through. The black walls toward high up above us, so that the din and noise of the cars were perfectly deafening. The screeching of the brakes (as they were all put on) and clanking and roar of the wheels, on the rails; and the rails were laid on rock all combined with the occasional thunder claps and lightning flashes, made the scene [an]ything but pleasant. (p. 150).

Allen notes more pleasant memories as well, such as boys playing hide go seek in the moonlight; other women describe children playing with antelope during rest times. In Yellowstone Valley, Allen writes that she could see and hear “friendly Indians...yelling and their dogs barking” as they beat “their buffalo hide drums (p. 168).

In the Summer of 1881, Emily Towell, 52, in her travel journals from Missouri to Idaho, states, while in Plum Creek, Nebraska, “[L]ightning danced across the heavens in bold streaks of fire; the thunder rolled and crashed; the wind howled and shrieked like wild and fearful demons” (p. 204). She complained about how wagons raised “great clouds of dust” and their team never received much

relief from it, other than when they “stop[ped] long enough to eat and water horses” (p. 216).

An Authentic Western Soundscape Emerges

Common to the letters, journals, and notes were mentions of wind, dust, and dirt. Clouds of wind and dust, particularly together, created a deafening pounding across the eardrums. The sound became trapped within the cloud. The wagons pushed forward, with more than a dozen teams of horses leading the way. The constant pounding of hooves on dry ground created a sense of drone. All sounds came together to unsettle the senses and stomachs of men, women, and children. Such descriptions let us re-hear the times and conditions. It was impossible to see at times, and nearly impossible to hear – until the wagon train would settle down for the night. During winter months, snow brought a dangerous silence and solitude to the ground that warned of famine. In the spring, the whoosh of mud under wagon wheels was as much heard as felt and seen. The sound of



Photo: Phyllis Johnson

gunfire was common on the plains, as desperate and hungry trailblazers became hunters eager and anxious to shoot down wild game that crossed their path. At nights, and on the outskirts of so-called civilized towns, drunken men could be heard shooting their guns in the air for fun and folly. Stars filled the open sky – and thundering crashes and lightening balls of fire warned of approaching storms. A time was coming when the West would be re-imagined on radio and across the big screen, rather than experienced on the open plains and under the great sky.

Settling into the Western Soundscape

People moved to and fro land, depending on the conditions for crops, transportation, and economic opportunity (Stratton, 1981). The acoustic characteristics of dirt, dust and wood blended into the constant rattle of wagons and horse hooves to create a dull roar. Many towns had at least one saloon, but usually several centered in the town center. A few squeaks across wooden plank sidewalks added to the soundscape. Music blared from dance halls as people went in and out of them. The hotel offered no real solitude for patrons, in that it was typically located near the center of town. Bagpipes heard through an open window of a hotel room, a violinist playing outside the steps of the general store, church hymns sung on Sunday mornings, and other sounds brought familiarity to settlers. The traditional church bell was a luxury, and rarely heard in the early days. Needless to say, the weary travelers’ senses had been transformed through their journey. They began to shape a soundscape that would become characteristic of the American West, somewhat reminiscent of the past, yet unique because of the landscape that surrounded them and the personal journey that they had ventured.

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