

## Reconceptualizing The Old West: A Tale of Two Indexes

by Francine Cronshaw

### The Letters and Their Times

During the 1800s many families of European origin were split apart by the immigration of some, and the fact that other family members chose to stay behind. On an impulse of the kind that 20-year-olds live to regret, Charles Francis "Frank" Clarke left his law studies in England for the U.S. West. Once there economic necessity forced him to enlist in the U.S. Army and eventually he met fellow immigrant Mary McGowan, who would become his wife and the mother of their five sons.

The physical distance between Clarke and his English relatives was enormous. Indeed, he begged his mother for a daguerreotype of her and his "dear sisters" since after several years in the New World, he wrote, "I despair of ever seeing you again in this world." But though the physical distances were great, they were bridged by a quarter century of letters (1847–1872). First the letters were between Clarke and his parents. Later, after Frank's untimely death from scarlet fever while on duty during the Civil War, the correspondence was solely between the two widows, Anne Clarke and the daughter-in-law she had never met, Mary McGowan Clarke.

The letters have both historical significance and human interest. They speak to the separation of families that occurs during the immigrant experience and the regrets of those striking out to a new world of opportunity as well as the sorrows of the family members left behind in the Old World. These letters give us a taste of the frontier experience, as Clarke's early postings were to cavalry forts in New Mexico Territory. Those forts held the lines of Western civilization firm against the raiding Apaches and Comanches. Later, a more settled life in small-town Kansas was no less precarious albeit in other ways.

The railroad was at once a boon for promoters and land speculators and a scourge for small-time property owners such as the Clarkes who were forced, through their taxes, to pay for railroad expansion. The price for the progress of the West, it seems, was steep and not always paid by those who reaped the greatest rewards from that progress. In the semi-arid plains of Kansas and Oklahoma (a set of similar complaints is found in *Letters from the Dust Bowl*), droughts and other inclemencies ruined the prospects of crops, often several years in a row. During her long widowhood, Mary struggled with both high taxes and falling property values (showing considerable business acumen) in her determined efforts to raise five young sons on her own.

The human qualities revealed in the letters also take the reader on yet another journey into the past, where family relations and expectations about life and death are so different from our own today. Although she never met her mother-in-law Anne Clarke, Mary developed a close and trusting relationship with the in-laws in England. That close relationship seems to be belied by the rather stiff and formal opening and closing salutations of the 19th century ("Ever your affectionate daughter, Mary Clarke.")

Within that structure of formal addresses and the respectful distance of an Irish Catholic (and former servant) for her more affluent Church of England mother-in-law, the letters of the years of Mary's widowhood communicated an ever-deeper reliance on her mother-in-law for emotional support. Mary called herself "a bird alone," after the death of her sister in St. Louis and more often after the loss of her husband. She wrote her mother-in-law:

You don't know how glad I would be to see you if such a thing was possible and how my heart aches at times for some kind friend to

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Francine Cronshaw has taught U.S. and Latin American history at the college level. Besides the humanities and social sciences, she specializes in indexes in Spanish: [www.spanishindexing.com](http://www.spanishindexing.com).

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be near me. If only to ask for council (sic) or advice, but here I am bird alone, god only to guide me.

Anne Clarke in faraway Surrey, England, not only sent her son's family financial support on occasion but she was also privy to the "intimacy of money" — the constant trials of a cash-poor mother trying to raise and educate five sons in frontier Kansas.

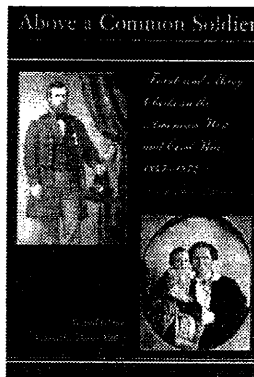
Our cultural heritage emphasizes self-reliance and personal independence, values that are associated with the Wild West era. Those values are subject to another, more severe examination in light of reading Frank and Mary's letters. Far removed from a theme-park version of the Wild West, the letters described life on frontier as precarious and likely to be snatched away by a gun accident or infectious disease, if not by early childhood maladies easily cured today. Mary often referred to the future of an apparently sturdy son with the expression "if he lives," as if she herself could not believe beating the odds by having all her sons live to adulthood. Besides the uncertainty of health conditions, there was also the struggle to manage business affairs in the man's world of the Old West. Mary was determined and persistent in the face of labor shortages, crop failures and high tax burdens.

It's possible if we could have asked Mary about finding a "land of opportunity" in the West, she might not have understood the question immediately. Indeed, her letters take us in a different direction from the mythology

of cinematic legend and novelistic lore about life on the range. Instead of a romantic package of the West for tourist consumption, an Old Mesilla or a Dodge City, the letters show us a Junction City of land speculation, boarding houses and poor schools. The letters make us reexamine our own understandings of what the West was and what it means.

## The Indexes and Their Times

In 1941 the correspondence of Frank and Mary Clarke was published under the title of *To Form A More Perfect Union*:



*The Lives of Charles Francis and Mary Clarke From Their Letters, 1847-1871* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press). Professor Herbert O. Brayer edited the letters and provided an introduction and notes. It is not known who prepared the index. Prof. Brayer's introduction emphasized larger historical events that influenced, often at considerable distance, the lives of the Clarks (War with Mexico, claiming the West from the Plains Indians, the Civil War and so forth). The print run for the first edition was 350 copies. In a very real sense, what happened in the West was a reflection of larger, national-scale events.

The second edition of the letters was released in 1997. The new edition was entitled *Above a Common Soldier: Frank and Mary Clarke in the American West and Civil War* (same publisher). The author of this article had the privilege of creating the index for the second edition. The compiler (editor) of the second printing of the letters was history professor (now emeritus) Darlis A. Miller, a specialist in Western Women's History. She supplied a new introduction and notes, which reflected more updated approaches to issues of gender and ethnicity along with women's, family and social history. The American West had moved to center stage; it was affected by outside events but nonetheless claimed its own narrative space.

Although the letters were the same set for each volume, the worldview of the compiler-editors was very distinct, reflecting the life and times of the two scholarly editors. The first printing occurred while war raged in Europe and on the eve of U.S. entry into World War II, while vestiges of the Great Depression were still present in many Western communities. The second printing of the letters took place in an era of postmodern academics with their plethora of academic subspecialties reflecting a nuanced approach to gender and women's role in both the public and private spheres. The older emphasis on military and political history had been eclipsed by polyglot approaches to social history, which emphasized race, class and gender.

According to the sociology of knowledge (which preceded Derrida and the deconstructionists by at least a century), the production of concepts and other forms of knowledge does not occur in a value-free, objective vacuum. It is socially conditioned by the times; standards of what is seen to be the *truth* are directly related by the ideology of a particular society (often called the "dominant paradigm"). What is worthy of discussion and what is ignored are similarly dictated by place and time.

I'd like to take the sociology of knowledge framework to briefly examine some features of the two indexes. Not only did the introductions by the two scholarly editors "frame" the letters by establishing the context from which they should be examined and how they should be understood. They also set up "markers" for each index that the indexer could follow. In the examples below, we'll look both at a comparison of what is common to each index as well as what isn't there (omissions, additions and substitutions).

The first example deals with ethnicity questions (The first edition index materials precede the second edition in each of the examples which follow.):

- .....
- Indian(s): 3, 19, 31, 32, 35, 36, 41, 45 fn. 5, 53 fn. 8, 55-57, 59, 63, 65, 79, 81 fn. 5, 89 fn. 9, 120, 129, 155; Agent, 52 fn.7
- .....

In the 1997 edition, its counterpart read as follows:

- .....
- Native Americans: Arkansas River, 24; attack mule train, 43; Battle of Cieneguilla, 48-49; border area, 47; Brulé Sioux, 50-51; campaigns against, 51, 52-53, 54; Cheyennes, 61; "civilized" Indian rights, 13; Comanches, 23, 32; emigrants attacked, 18; First Dragoons and, 32; fur trade, 4, 11, 27; Harney campaign, 51; Jicarilla Apaches, 25; Kiowas, 23; New Mexico, 43, 44; Seminoles, 32; unrest in West, 21, 31-32, 141; unrest on Santa Fe Trail, 23, 42. *See also* Plains Indians wars
- .....

Since the first edition index was produced decades before there was a professional organization such as the American Society of Indexers in existence to promulgate standards to evaluate indexes, I'll leave aside the obvious criticism about the need for subentries. But I would like to point out that the second edition main entry does make Indians seem more like historical actors with *agency* (that is, capable of action and not just reaction or as objects of oppression).

In the first edition, the main entry for women in the index had one page locator and referred to Prof. Brayer's introduction where the women's suffrage movement was mentioned within a larger discussion of 19th century political issues. In the second edition, the main entry for women was as follows:

- .....
- Women: business roles, 134; Civil War widows, 95; daily duties of Western, 133; female friendship, xvi; invalidism, 133; social roles, 132. *See also* Widowhood; Widows' rights for military spouses
- .....

The emphasis on the Catholic Church also varied greatly. In the first edition, an unadorned entry for "Catholics: 4, 52, 129" sufficed but the second edition showed a greater recognition of the Catholic influence on the Clarke family:

- .....
- Catholic Church: Charles's possible entry, 154, 156; children confirmed, 154; marriage in, 23, 40; Mary's devotion to, xv, 106, 133, 189; offer to educate Charles, 133. *See also* Church of St. Francis Xavier; Jesuits
- .....

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### **Reconceptualizing The Old West (continued)**

The use of presidential administrations as "markers" for the political context of the letters in the first edition is clear in the number of page locators:

.....  
: Presidents: United States, 1, 3-5, 14, 15, 19-21, 23, 32, 33 fn. 1, :  
: 35, 44 fn. 4, 48, 59, 67-70, 85 fn. 8, 91, 92, 95 fn. 2, 98 fn. 5, :  
: 119, 170 fn. 2 :  
.....

In the second edition, relatively few presidents appear ("Polk, James K., 2, 12;" "Presidential elections of 1860, 54, 70;" "Taylor, Zachary, 11, 12, 14, 18, 37"), and they are usually pulled directly from the letters themselves, rather than reflecting the scholarly editor's choice of topics.

### **Conclusion**

Reading the two indexes side by side leads to inevitable comparisons and reflections on the nature of indexing. Like the writing of history itself, the indexing of historical materials is a socially constructed activity. It is not only the educational background of the indexer that predisposes her or him toward the selection of topics to include in a given index. Both the book's author (or authors) and the author of the index are also influenced by paradigm shifts in respective academic fields, by contemporary "buzzwords" (shorthand for larger social/political issues) and by the emergence of new sub-fields of research. Indexers need to be aware of the inherent subjectivity of indexing categories. Even if they feel they are only replicating the usages of the book's author, indexers are committing a new conceptual geography to print every time they create an index. ☞