Images of a Western Daughter An Analysis of the letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk 1867-1892

Marie Mullarkey

Carroll College, Helena, MT

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Images of a Western Daughter
An Analysis of the letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk
1867-1892

Elizabeth Chester Fisk, early 1860s —Montana Historical Society

By Marie T Mullarkey

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Debra Bernardi  04.11.03
Director

4-10-03
Date

Brett L. Dodds  April 10, 2003
Reader

April 7, 2003
Date

Robert Asantoku  April 7, 2003
Reader

Cheryl S. Conon  April 7, 2003
Reader
ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Chester Fisk of Vernon, Connecticut arrived in Helena as a new bride in 1867. Seeking to describe her new life to her mother, Elizabeth began a 26-year correspondence with her mother that lasted until the time of her mother’s death in 1893. In these letters to her mother Elizabeth expresses her opinions, values and beliefs and creates an image for her mother of her life on the frontier.

Through the communication research method of content analysis, five themes emerged from the letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk: (a) Portraying a Fashionable Woman, (b) Presenting an Educated, Religious, and Morally Superior Woman, (c) Managing the Family Home Well, (d) Trying to be a Good Mother and (e) Becoming Politically Astute and Involved in Social Causes.

Four of these themes reflect the nineteenth century’s traditional definition of the “cult of true womanhood” which defined woman as pure, pious, submissive and domestic. This definition designated women as proper or civilized and placed them in the role of civilizers. Elizabeth’s letters illustrate the tension and challenges in meeting this definition. The fifth theme shows Elizabeth falling outside the definition of a “true woman” through her political activism. Through the letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk, an image of a woman emerges who both attempts to meet the nineteenth century definition of a proper woman and also rebels against it.
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................. i
INTRODUCTIONS ........................................................................ iii

CHAPTER 1
METHODS .................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 2
RESULTS ...................................................................................... 3

CHAPTER 3
CONCLUSION ................................................................................. 51

APPENDIX A ................................................................................... 55
APPENDIX B ................................................................................... 57
APPENDIX C ................................................................................... 59
WORKS CITED ............................................................................... 60
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I also want to thank my mother who has always had a love of western history. You always wanted to know the stories “behind the doors” of the weather-beaten log cabins we saw as we traveled throughout the west. It is perhaps this love of history and the west that I now inherit from you in the mid-term of my life. Here is a story of a home and a woman, “the editor’s wife,” who lived behind its doors.

This four-year journey began as I left the safe and comfortable life I knew so well. It has taken me to new places I never thought I would go. I now look forward to the journey ahead.

To explore new oceans,
We must lose sight of the shore

(Author unknown)
INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Chester Fisk and her mother, Mrs. Azuba Chester, were two women who, if they had the chance, probably would have preferred to keep their communication exchanges on a face-to-face level. This was not to be, however. Elizabeth Chester Fisk of Vernon, Connecticut, left her mother in 1867 for a new life with her husband on the western frontier. Robert E Fisk had accepted the challenging task of establishing a new Republican newspaper in the frontier-mining town of Helena, Montana, and Elizabeth accompanied him (Myers 2). It is at this point that Elizabeth and her mother were forced into using the only other channel of long distance communication available at the time—written communication. Letters were the main communication medium that Elizabeth used to “speak” to her mother.

This written communication medium is an example of two of the fundamentals of communication—permanence and portability. In his book, Communication and Human Behavior, Brent D. Ruben declares that the symbols of communication “can have permanence and significance apart from the situation in which they were originally used” (97). The letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk are permanent and their significance today rests in the ability of others to see the images of a woman and the western frontier first hand and uncensored. These letters provide a lens through which we see one particular woman’s view of life on the western frontier. The “situation in which they were originally used,” writing home to mother, is significant in that by its assumption of honest communication, it contributes to the reality of women’s lives in the west during the latter half of the nineteenth century.
Ruben also asserts that the non-transitory nature of the symbols of communication “makes it possible for us to accumulate and transmit information from one generation to the next” (98). This is what has occurred with these letters. The information Elizabeth accumulated and transmitted to her mother in the later half of the nineteenth century has been passed on from one generation to the next.

It is this information and its transmission to future generations that has been of interest to other scholars, particularly historians. Rex Myers and Paula Petrik, noted historians, sought to examine Elizabeth’s letters from a historical perspective to track the development of Elizabeth and the Fisk family and to connect their lives to historical events and values of the period. Elizabeth’s letters provide rich narratives and descriptive prose, which contributed greatly to the history of western women, Helena, and the state of Montana.

Myers in his book, *Lizzie, The Letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk 1864-1893*, provides the reader with a glimpse of the development of the Fisk family through Elizabeth’s letters. Using Elizabeth’s letters as a road map, Myers traces Elizabeth and Robert’s relationship from their beginnings during the Civil War to their marriage and move to Montana (8). The text chronicles some of the significant events in Elizabeth’s immediate family including the death of her only sibling, Fannie, in October of 1871, her father’s death in January of 1892, and her mother’s death in March of 1893. Myers’s book also documents the births of Elizabeth’s children through her letters. Grace, the oldest, was born in 1869, Robbie in 1872, Clarke in 1875, Asa in 1877, and the twins Florence and James in 1882. This book, structured chronologically, recounts in detail the
history of the family and its challenges and provides invaluable information regarding family relationships.

Paula Petrik uses Elizabeth’s letters in her book No Step Backward. In Chapter Three, titled “Mothers and Daughters of El Dorado, The Generations of Helena’s Middling Women,” Petrik utilizes the letters to track the changes in Elizabeth and to illuminate the differences in values between Elizabeth and her daughter Grace. In summarizing the differences between the two generations, Petrik says, “The place Elizabeth arrived at after thirty years on the mining frontier was the place from which her daughter started out” (95). The frontier transformed Elizabeth while it represented a starting point for Grace.

In addition to their historical value, the letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk are of interest to communication scholars. From a communication perspective they illustrate the traditional model of communication, “people exchanging messages through channels within a context” (Frey 28). The people are mother and daughter, the channel is written communication, and the context is the western frontier in the late nineteenth century. As a model of communication these letters also represent a communication text to be studied. The letters represent a communication event. This study will investigate the letters as a communication event and will examine their purpose, their themes, and the larger message contained within the themes.

This study, and others like it, is important for several reasons. First, through this channel of written communication, we learn what the important issues were for women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Because these issues were recorded and presented we know they were important to women. Second, this study examines how
women communicated their identities to family members when separated by long distances. Lack of physical proximity to family members did not prevent women from seeking to communicate their identities. They simply used a channel other than face-to-face communication. Third, the study illustrates intimate mother-daughter communication, which occurred over a century ago. This provides a basis for comparison for other researchers to use with mother-daughter communication in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Fourth, the study provides a written history of the day-to-day, “slice of life,” activities of women on the western frontier in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Scholars have investigated the actions of individuals and the intent of these actions. Noted sociologist Erving Goffman professes in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* that the ‘true’ or ‘real’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his [or her] avowels [sic] or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior” (2). In this study I argue that by disclosing in her letters the details of her experiences in Helena, Elizabeth Chester Fisk sought to present herself to her mother. This presentment of self was communicated through the numerous expressions of her feelings, beliefs, and values. Through this written channel of communication, she discloses these beliefs and the actions, which supported them.

Communication scholar Jo Liska, claims that Goffman’s theory “explains how people present themselves in everyday life, choosing their clothes, the books they read, their friends, their expressed opinions, the interests they claim, their behaviors, and the ways they communicate so as to create a coherent image of themselves” (118). It is this
“coherent image” that Elizabeth attempted to create for her mother in her letters. Her letters home described the clothing she wore, the books she read, and her opinions on such diverse topics as drinking, morality, and motherhood.

The “coherent image” Elizabeth sought to portray was entwined with society’s perception of what constituted a “proper” woman in the nineteenth century. This perception was defined by the current literature of the era, which presented women in activities and roles that showed four primary values: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 21). This definition was coined “the cult of true womanhood.” The values of a “proper” woman could be maintained by keeping her safe within the home—the “domestic sphere.”

Piety, one of a woman’s values, was naturally given to her by God. A woman’s pious mind would lead her “more readily than men to accept the proffered grace of the Gospel” (Welter 22). Religion also helped women face the hardships of life: “‘God increased the cares and sorrows of woman that she might be sooner constrained to accept the terms of salvation.’” Church and church groups were an acceptable activity for women to engage in since it did not conflict with their domesticity or submissiveness and actually promoted these values (22).

Purity was also an essential characteristic of women: “the marriage night was the greatest event of a woman’s life, when she bestowed the greatest treasure upon her husband, and from that time on was completely dependent upon him, an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own” (Welter 23-4). Young women maintained this purity by avoiding close physical contact with young men prior to marriage: “‘Sit not with another in a place that is too narrow; read not out of the same
book; let not your eagerness to see anything induce you to place your head close to another person's” (24). Clothing also helped define a woman's purity. In the book The Ladies' Wreath a narrative regarding a young woman's experience wearing trousers ends with her saying, “... I have no disposition to wear it at all ... no true woman would so far compromise her delicacy...” (26).

Welter professes that “submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women” (27). In The Young Lady's Book women were told, “It is, however, certain, that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her.” Mrs. Sandford, a proponent of women's virtues of the era, said, “A really sensible women feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of inferiority, and therefore grateful for support” (28).

Domesticity was the final value expected of women: “the true dignity and beauty of the female character seem to consist in a right understanding and faithful and cheerful performance of social and family duties” (31). Women were encouraged to remain with the home: “let her not look away from her own little family circle for the means of producing moral and social reforms, but begin at home.” Within this “domestic sphere” housework was thought of as “uplifting”, needlework [sewing] as “the appropriate occupation of women” and letter writing “particularly feminine since it had to do with the outpourings of the heart.” (33).

Historian Julie Roy Jeffrey asserts that “Home, women's sphere, was described as a place of 'retirement' and 'retreat' as a private spot where women provided men with the peace and quiet missing in the public world” (6). Women were expected to provide a
safe haven for their husbands who were returning from the hectic world outside the confines of the family home. Within this sphere, “publicists claimed women were responsible for communicating moral and cultural values, too often forgotten in the workplace, to their families” (6). Women were responsible for using the home as a “moral classroom” for their children. It is within this framework of the definition of true womanhood that their role as civilizers is also defined. Ralph Waldo Emerson stated in a lecture to a woman’s group in 1855 “that the role of women in the progress of the human race was to function as the ‘civilizers of mankind.’ ‘What is civilization?’ he went on to ask. ‘I answer, the power of good women.’” (Quoted in Dobson, 225).

The role of women in society was expressed not only by the popular press of the day, but also in textbooks, which young men and women were exposed to. In discussing schoolchildren in the 1850’s, Jeffery declares that “Their school texts portrayed self-sacrificing domesticated women and described suitable female behavior in detail” (9). This portrayal stated that “A woman’s ‘voice is gentle; her pronunciation is delicate; her passions are never suffered to be boisterous . . . she never foams with anger; she is seldom seen in any masculine amusement.”” (9). Young women and men in the nineteenth century were schooled in the proper role of women through their access to formal education.

With these various texts and views of the era, the definition of a “proper” nineteenth-century woman emerges. She was submissive—a woman who served her husband and family without complaint. She was domestic—her duties included maintaining the family home, bearing children and raising them to be morally responsible. She was pious—attending church allowed her to publicly express her
devotion to God and placed her in activities that accentuated her proper values. Her strong faith in God helped her face the hardships and trials that presented themselves. She was pure—she wore proper clothing and remained a virgin until marriage. As she met these expectations she became a “good woman” which put her in the distinct position of a “civilizer of mankind” (Dobson 25).

Jeffrey alleges that the definition of domesticity and womanhood “described the norms and not the actual conduct of American women” (10). Even though the standards could not always be met, the definition nonetheless served a valuable purpose: “Still, norms were important because they established the behavioral context for those who tried to reject them as much as for those who attempted to realize them” (10). These norms, while sometimes unattainable, were nonetheless carried from the east to the west. In speaking of the women of Helena in the late nineteenth century, Petrik maintains that “They resumed their lives in a rough-and-tumble mining camp, accepting the nineteenth century women’s mission: to provide a home for their husbands, to rear their children, and to re-create the genteel domestic world—that is, to ‘keep house’” (60).

It is this standard of women’s behavior that Emerson felt defined their purpose in society and led to their responsibility to “civilize” the west. With their pure mind, and unselfish devotion to others, they would be the moral compasses of their communities. While the men in their lives worked outside the home to develop businesses and create the infrastructure of their communities, the women would focus on creating a home and correcting the social ills of society. By “keeping house,” they would bring order; by educating their children, they would cultivate healthy minds; and by remaining steadfast
in their religious beliefs, they would sow the seeds of morality. These responsibilities were their contribution to the development and “civilizing” of the west.

Through the application of content analysis, I will argue that Elizabeth Chester Fisk, via the communication medium of letters, communicated two things. First, she communicated a particular and specific “presentment of self” to her mother. This “self” was a fashionable, moral, temperate, Christian woman who worked hard to maintain her strong values and beliefs. Through this “presentment of self” we see a woman who attempted to meet the nineteenth-century’s definition of a woman. It is in her letters that we see the tension in meeting this definition.

This tension was illustrated throughout the letters when Elizabeth expressed her frustration at people or activities that prevent her from meeting the expectations of a nineteenth-century woman. She wanted to raise morally responsible children, but was hampered by the education they received and the ills of society they were exposed to. She longed to outwardly express her devotion to God and prop up her religious beliefs, but found it difficult to find acceptable ministers and churches. She aspired to keep a clean home, but was prevented from doing so by the lack of acceptable domestic help.

Second, Elizabeth participated in constructing the social reality of women’s lives in the west and their attempts to “civilize” the west. Elizabeth’s day-to-day activities chronicled in her letters, illustrated the hard work required of women during this time. Her association with church groups and her political activism showed the steps taken by women both individually and collectively, which brought order to the western frontier. Through these activities the values and beliefs present in the modern cities of the east were incorporated into the west. These day-to-day activities combined to contribute to
the transformation of Helena from a rough and tumble mining town to a settled western community.

Elizabeth Chester Fisk was an enigma in relation to the more typical picture of a western woman portrayed by literature: “...the frightened, tearful woman wrenched from home and hearth and dragged off into the terrible West where she is condemned to a life of lonely terror among savage beasts and rapine Indians” (Myres 1). Elizabeth was not the idealized “Madonna of the Prairies” (Myres 1), who traversed the Plains to reach an isolated, desolate homestead on the vast western prairie. She did not wield a plow alongside her husband and convert the barren hard-packed earth to a soft and fertile ground. Elizabeth also did not fit the stereotype of “The sturdy helpmate who could fight Indians, kill the bear in the barn, make two pots of lye soap, and do a week’s wash before dinnertime ...” (Myres 3). She was not a woman who circulated in the upper-class societies of the west and whose husband was a predominant member of the community. Elizabeth was a middle-class woman who lived in an urban setting with her husband who was a businessman. Living in Helena for 26-years, she represented the minority of women who remained within the same community for an extended length of time (Jeffrey 105). Her middle-class status allowed her to stay for the most part within her “domestic sphere” while her husband worked outside the home. Portrayals of middle-class women like Elizabeth were not present in the literature I reviewed. Her voice spoke of the challenges she faced in attempting to maintain order and civility from her unique urban perspective. The letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk showed a woman who communicated to her mother the triumphs and challenges in attempting to maintain the vision of a proper woman of the nineteenth century. The letters also communicated Elizabeth’s shift out of
society’s proscribed “domestic sphere.” As Elizabeth faced the challenges the frontier presented, and the constraining nature of the definition of a proper woman, she made a conscious effort to shift out of this sphere. She recognized that there was work to be done regarding morality and the protection of others. She pierced the shield of the domestic sphere and entered the outside world.
CHAPTER 1

METHODS

In determining the messages being communicated, I chose to use the research method of content analysis. A content analysis method is used when researchers want to “identify, enumerate, and analyze occurrences of specific messages and message characteristics embedded in texts” (Frey 236). The text I chose was the outgoing correspondence of Elizabeth Chester Fisk to her mother, Mrs. Azuba Chester, from 1867 to 1893, which is located in Manuscript Collection #31 at the Montana Historical Society Library in Helena, Montana.

Original letters and transcribed copies make up the manuscript collection. This material, which is the property of the State of Montana, is available to the general public within a controlled access setting. I obtained access to the texts by completing a request form. I photocopied the transcribed letters on the library premises and was allowed to use my photocopies for this study.

The letters of Elizabeth Fisk total 600 (Myers 30). With the time allotted for this study, it would have been impossible to analyze each letter. For that reason I found it necessary to use a representative sampling. My intent was to procure a sample which was large enough to identify the themes Elizabeth communicated during her 25-year correspondence with her mother. In order to follow a particular event or theme from beginning to end as much as possible, I chose to sample letters in chronological order one year at a time. To determine if the themes occurred throughout the 25-years, I chose to sample letters every fifth year. The letters that were analyzed were from 1867, 1872, 1877, 1882, 1887, and 1892. The dates of these letters are listed in Appendix B. These
letters totaled 112 and represented 170 pages of transcribed pages. Because of the scope of this sampling, I was able to conduct a longitudinal analysis to identify the beliefs, attitudes, and values of Elizabeth during her 25-year correspondence with her mother.

The narratives contained within these letters place Elizabeth within the particular culture of the western frontier. Therefore, analysis of them represents a naturalistic study. Frey states that “We call research that focuses on how people behave when they are absorbed in genuine life experiences in natural settings, naturalistic inquiry” (257).

To begin this inductive textual analysis I read each transcribed letter and placed phrases, individual sentences, paragraphs or in some cases entire letters into various thematic categories based on the content. A thematic category was created when the message or verbiage contained in the sentence or phrase recurred. For example, any reference to church or religion was placed in the category titled Religion/Church. These initial categories totaled fifty-seven and were not mutually exclusive. Some messages were placed in more than one category. These categories appear as Appendix A.

Subsequent to the initial analysis, I sorted the categories a second time. After this second step five major themes emerged. These themes are detailed in the Results section of this study and appear in Appendix C.
CHAPTER 2

RESULTS

The results of the study show that Elizabeth attempted to present many images to her mother. Her multi-faceted persona was outwardly one of a woman who liked fashionable clothing. Her religious, moralistic self was one that was challenged by the lack of a support structure in the form of acceptable churches and ministers. Her high morals were shown by her strong opinions on the evils of drinking and dancing. Elizabeth’s image as homemaker was illustrated through her work at maintaining a clean, orderly home. Her role as mother was challenged by a lack of good teachers and her children’s exposure to the ills of society. She became politically active later in life and worked hard to protect women who had no voice.

The images that Elizabeth presented to her mother were represented by the five major themes that were extracted from the study: (a) Portraying a Fashionable Woman; (b) Presenting an Educated, Religious, and Morally Superior Woman; (c) Managing the Family Home Well; (d) Trying to be a Good Mother; and (e) Becoming Politically Astute and Involved in Social Causes. Within these themes some sub-themes emerged.

The theme, Presenting an Educated, Religious and Morally Superior Woman, was represented by four sub-themes: (1) Attempting to Maintain her Religious Beliefs, (2) Expressing her Religious Beliefs, (3) Preaching About the Vices of Drinking and Dancing, and (4) Expanding Her Literary Horizons. Another theme identified, Managing the Family Home Well, had four sub-themes: (1) Maintaining a Clean, Warm Home, (2) Challenges and Successes with Domestic Help, (3) Furnishing an Elegant Home, and (4) Creating a Beautiful Exterior. The theme, Trying to be a Good Mother, was illustrated by
four sub-themes: (1) Expressing Values and Beliefs on Childrearing, (2) Educating Children on the Frontier, (3) Instilling Good Morals in Children, and (4) Creating Fashionable Clothing for Children. The theme, Becoming Politically Astute and Involved in Social Causes, had four major sub-themes (1) Discussing Politicians, (2) Attempting to Relieve the Suffering of the Poor, (3) Becoming Active in Women’s Causes, and (4) Defending her Outside Activities.

In presenting the results of these themes I have listed them in order of their frequency. The theme, Portraying a Fashionable Woman, is presented first due to its numerous illustrations in the text. The final theme, Becoming Politically Astute and Involved in Social Causes, represented the theme with the fewest amount of examples and therefore appears last.

The following detail presents the first theme within the study, Portraying a Fashionable Woman. This theme provided the most examples during the analysis of the text. The nineteenth-century value of domesticity was illustrated in this theme by the time and energy Elizabeth spent creating her clothing. Purity, another virtue, was illustrated by her creation of the proper clothing for women—dresses. The outward appearance she portrayed to others reinforced society’s view of a proper woman. The challenges Elizabeth faced in keeping this proper look were expressed when she complained about the Montana environment and its effect on her clothing and the high cost of sewing supplies.

**Portraying a Fashionable Woman**

Elizabeth’s references to clothing were numerous in her letters. Jeffrey in her book, *Frontier Women, The Trans-Mississippi West 1840–1800* (1979), asserts that
clothing was important to women on the western frontier. In speaking of women’s discussions regarding clothing, Jeffrey writes, “Although it might seem puzzling as well as superficial for women in frontier communities to talk of fashion, these discussions reinforced their sense of identity and increased their feeling of control over their environment” (86). As Elizabeth talked to her mother about the clothing she wore, she created a sense of identity. She could control this identity by creating the clothing she wore.

The individualistic identity which clothing helped create for Elizabeth also helped create the collective vision of a civilized woman. Jeffrey alleges in Frontier Women that “Appropriate clothes, the end result of discussion, helped to encourage and reinforce correct behavior and establish a proper society” (86). The larger message that clothing represented in the western frontier was to define a “proper society.” This proper society was represented by an appropriate “look” that the women of the time portrayed through their dress. This look was socially constructed through discussions of clothing. Elizabeth participated in this social construction through the communication she had with her mother and through the clothing she created, received, and wore.

Elizabeth talked often about the clothing and accessories she made or received as gifts. These entries provide vivid details of the characteristics of the items and Elizabeth’s personal view of the look they represent. Through these passages Elizabeth described what she considered pretty and in doing so communicated her vision of fashion. Six months after her arrival in Montana, Elizabeth said, “Yesterday I made my bonnet. It looks much as it did last winter except that I have white velvet flowers for the inside, which are more becoming than the pink of last year” (Fisk, 12-15-1867). In this
entry Elizabeth described the modification she had made to her hat. Her use of the words “more becoming than the pink of last year,” indicated the fashionable look she was attempting to create that would improve on last year’s look. Her bonnet was fashionable last year in the east and she worked hard to improve on it this year. Another entry illustrated Elizabeth’s view of fashionable in clothing: “I intended to mention in my last letter the completion of the gingham dress which Miss Bruce cut for me when she was here. It is very pretty, has a bias fold around the skirt, headed by the embroidery, full waist and puffed sleeves, and is light and cool” (Fisk, 7-10-1892). In this letter Elizabeth used her descriptive prose to describe in vivid detail the look of her dress to her mother. Her phrase “it is very pretty” is supported by the very specific description of its parts: “has a bias fold around the skirt,” “headed by embroidery” and “full waist with puffed sleeves.” In characterizing this garment to her mother she qualified the adjective “pretty” by creating a picture of the dress for her mother by detailing its various parts. With this vivid description her mother may be able to visualize her daughter in it. Elizabeth created the image of herself in a new pretty dress for her mother. She completed her explanation of the dress by illustrating its practicality with the words “light and cool.” Elizabeth appreciated the fashion the dress represented but also recognized the function it served in the summer. This entry supports Jeffrey’s assertion that clothing represented a way that women had control over their environment. Elizabeth controlled her environment by both creating a dress she is proud of and having it serve a useful purpose in the hot Montana summer.

Elizabeth also talked about the clothing she received as gifts: “My dress is so nice and so beautifully made. I know not how to thank you for your trouble. I am
pleased with it in every detail, the fit is perfect, the style becoming, and I do not see how it could be improved in any way ...." (Fisk 12-20-1877). In this entry the phrases “my dress is so nice and so beautifully made, I know not how to thank you for your trouble,” and “I do not see how it could be improved in any way,” seemed to indicate that the dress was sewn by her mother. The phrase “the style becoming” indicated again Elizabeth’s perception of what is fashionable. This entry was significant because it showed perhaps the similarity in thoughts between mother and daughter on what was fashionable for the time. Her mother’s creation of this dress showed the connection between mother and daughter and illustrated perhaps a shared image of what constituted a beautiful dress. It is this implied shared image that connected daughter to mother. By creating a dress for her daughter, Mrs. Chester was now contributing to the social construction of fashion in the west. She was helping in the creation of “a proper society” (Jeffrey 86).

In addition to dresses made by her mother in the east, Elizabeth also received gifts of clothing from her husband when he returned from business trips. Elizabeth wrote, “Rob brought us all so many nice and useful things. We have each a new dress and also merino underclothes and stockings. Every article is nice of its kind, and the dresses very pretty and selected with much taste” (Fisk, 6-12-1877). In this instance Elizabeth referred to both the usefulness and nicety of the items. The phrase in this entry, “merino underclothes and stockings,” refers to a very specific quality wool. This indicated perhaps her and Rob’s view of the importance of high quality items of clothing. The reference to the items being “very pretty and selected with much taste” indicated perhaps an implied shared image of the look Elizabeth and her husband Rob wanted to
communicate. Rob helped support Elizabeth’s fashionable image by bringing her clothing from the east that she found tasteful and practical.

With her new garments Elizabeth Chester Fisk presented the image of a tastefully dressed western woman. Her continued reference to garments in her letters communicated her view of the importance clothing played in the image she wished to project to her mother. It is in these entries which reference clothing that we see her work at creating the “coherent image” that Liska spoke of. The clothing Elizabeth sewed or received as gifts communicated a certain look which created a sense of identity and control over her environment (Jeffrey 86). Her access to the current fashions of the day was updated throughout her 26-years in Montana by her mother and husband in the form of gifts. As a woman with ties to the east, Elizabeth attempted to maintain the image of a stylish, proper woman and brought respectability to the western frontier (Jeffrey 86).

This image, however, was challenged by the western urban environment of Helena. Elizabeth spoke of this challenge shortly after her arrival: “Up and down, down and up, trailing one’s clean skirts through the mud is far from pleasant” (Fisk, 12-15-67). In this entry Elizabeth expressed her frustration at the muddy streets of Helena and the effect it has on clothing. The frustration at the western environment and its ability to break down Elizabeth’s fashionable civilized image was communicated to her mother. Another challenge Elizabeth faced regarding clothing was the cost of fabric and patterns in Helena: “I am glad to hear dress goods are cheap. We had not discovered it out here. I paid a dollar and a quarter a yard for tricot for the babie’s [sic] suits. My own dress pattern was $22.50. I have been thinking quite seriously of late of sending away for dry goods” (Fisk, 5-8-87). Another challenge to Elizabeth’s attempt to retain her “coherent
image” presented itself. In this case it was a financial challenge. Fashion came at a high price on the western frontier.

In summary, the nineteenth century values of domesticity and purity were illustrated when Elizabeth talked about her clothing. She worked hard within her “domestic sphere” by creating the proper clothing. It was important to Elizabeth that this clothing be stylish. Tension was evident when she was unable to maintain this image because of the weather or when sewing supplies were costly.

In addition to Elizabeth’s image of a fashionable woman, she also communicated to her mother throughout the text an image of her moral self, which represented the second theme, Presenting an Educated, Religious, and Morally Superior Woman.

**Presenting an Educated, Religious and Morally Superior Woman**

The second major theme to emerge from the study was Presenting an Educated, Religious and Morally Superior Woman. Within this theme, four sub-themes emerged: Attempting to Maintain her Religious Beliefs, Expressing her Religious Beliefs, Preaching High Morals, and Expanding her Literary Horizons.

This theme showed the tension Elizabeth felt while trying to maintain her “coherent image” of a proper woman. Elizabeth struggled with the presentment of herself as a pious woman of the nineteenth-century. The lack of acceptable churches made her outward expression of devotion to God difficult to achieve. Her desire to renew her faith with inspirational sermons was also challenged by a lack of good ministers. She found membership in church groups challenging when others did not share her views on dancing—an activity which violated the value of purity. Reading, an acceptable expression of domesticity, was illustrated when she spoke of the books and magazines
she read from the east. However, she ventured outside the definition of “proper” literature by reading a “forbidden book” later in life.

Attempting to Maintain her Religious Beliefs

In writing about religion on the frontier, Jeffrey states that “Many women found that church membership and activities satisfied deep spiritual needs” (96). Elizabeth struggled with fulfilling her spiritual needs. She wrote frequently about the sermons given by ministers, expressing both positive and negative views. She strongly analyzed both the delivery and messages being delivered by these men of God. Her expectations were very high for the role these men played in helping her to maintain her religious convictions. The strong opinions Elizabeth shared with her mother contributed to her “coherent image.” These opinions showed a woman who was attempting to renew her religious beliefs and to be inspired by these men of God, but was instead frustrated by the dearth of good minister’s the frontier had to offer. Her frustration with one minister was clear:

Mr. Hough’s sermon was quite a success in his own eyes at least.

Sometimes I regret that I learned to listen critically to preaching. It would perhaps be better to accept every word as gospel and pin my faith on the sleeve of my pastor. I do so long for a good sermon, well studied, carefully written and quietly read .... (Fisk, 12-15-1867)

This entry detailed Elizabeth’s expectations of what represented a good sermon. Her comment, “was quite a success in his own eyes at least,” indicated that while the minister may have thought it was a good sermon, it did not meet her expectations. The sentence, “I regret that I learned to listen critically to preaching,” indicated that at some point in her
religious education she was schooled in the elements of a good sermon. It is unclear whether this education was formal or perhaps informal, with her parents pointing out the proper elements. These elements are delineated in her final comment: “I do so long for a good sermon, well studied, carefully written and quietly read.” These are the qualities of the sermons that ministers on the western frontier will have to deliver in order to be acceptable in her eyes. Especially telling in this entry is her comment that “It would perhaps be better to accept every word as gospel and pin my faith on the sleeve of my pastor.” From this entry Elizabeth appeared to be saying that it would be easier to be ignorant of religious beliefs and simply accept what was said. However, with her strong religious faith and upbringing she knew better. She will have to rely on her own strong religious upbringing to fortify her convictions if the ministers could not.

Some ministers, however, were acceptable to Elizabeth: “His sermon tonight has done me a world of good. I feel as if its influences would go with me through this week ....” (Fisk, 1-19-1872). This minister’s sermon has clearly delivered a much-needed “boost” to Elizabeth’s religious convictions, which will sustain her in the challenging week ahead. This minister was acceptable in Elizabeth’s eyes. Eight months later, a more expressive Elizabeth described a sermon from a different minister:

I was more than pleased with his effort. You would like him, I know, as he preaches without notes. He possesses a great deal of magnetism carrying his audience with him in almost breathless attention from beginning to end. He is decidedly original, both in manner and matter; and taking all things into consideration we Helenaites [sic] look upon him as a God-send ..... (Fisk, 9-15-72)
In this example we learn not only about Elizabeth’s views on preachers but also get a glimpse of how her mother might rate him as well when she said, “you would like him, I know, as he preaches without notes.” Mother and daughter may have previously discussed their expectations of ministers. There was an assumed shared meaning of what a good minister represented between mother and daughter. Elizabeth indicated that she liked him when she said that she was “more than pleased with his effort.” Expanding on the reason for this pleasure she talked about him possessing “a great deal of magnetism carrying his audience with him in almost breathless attention,” and how he was “decidedly original, both in manner and matter.” With his excellent oratory skills he has inspired Elizabeth and has helped her share an image with her mother of how this man of God will help Elizabeth in continuing to renew her religious faith.

Elizabeth also expressed her frustration at finding a suitable church in which to worship. This challenge has been identified by Myers, who alleges that “Americans saw the untamed wilderness as immoral and irreligious, and men and women alike decried the lack of churches and other suitable moral and religious institutions” (186). Elizabeth communicated this lack of suitable churches:

There seems to be some hope that Mr. Stoy may be induced to remove to Helena in which case I shall become connected with the Episcopal Church. I cannot be a Methodist. I cannot be a Baptist, and there seems no hope of any other church organization here for some time to come .....  

(Fisk, 1-29-1872)

In this example it appeared that Elizabeth selected a church based not on its beliefs, but rather on its minister. Based on her positive view of a minister and his addition to the
church she indicated she would join the Episcopal Church. Her words, “I cannot be a Methodist, I cannot be a Baptist” seemed to indicate that the principles of these churches would be unacceptable. Her final comment, “there seems no hope of any other church organization here for some time to come” illustrated her frustration at finding an acceptable house of worship and that perhaps she had to “settle” for the Episcopal Church. Elizabeth continued to struggle with the lack of an acceptable church. The image of a religious woman, attempting to find a good house of worship, is communicated to her mother.

Elizabeth also disclosed to her mother on occasion her more personal views about her belief in God and her inner spiritual self. These views were illustrated in the following sub-theme, Expressing her Religious Beliefs.

Expressing her Religious Beliefs

Elizabeth’s communicated her personal beliefs in God indirectly through the narratives she told of others. These statements illustrated Goffman’s assertion that “true’ or ‘real’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his [or her] avowels [sic] or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior” (2). One example of an indirect avowal from Elizabeth involved a Sabbath class she taught for seven young girls between the ages of 13 and 15. Elizabeth was upset that the girls were more interested in dancing and flirting and did not appear to be studying their lesson plans. She said, “They do not care that Jesus suffered and died for them and cannot be made to feel that such love demands something in return” (Fisk 1-19-1872). From this entry we get a sense of Elizabeth’s deep unfailing religious conviction when she said, “Jesus suffered and died.” This belief, and its accompanying
thankfulness for the sacrifice Jesus made, was then transformed into her view that as mortals this sacrifice demanded “something in return.” She did not expand on what she considered the “something in return.” However her comments regarding the girl’s actions of dancing and flirting were not the “something in return” Elizabeth pictured.

Elizabeth expressed her religious beliefs indirectly again when she discussed the death of her son Robbie’s girlfriend and the temptations he faced in Helena:

You ask if Robbie is not a good man, or rather if “he gives cause for undue anxiety.” He has never done that, but a boy or young man is constantly exposed to many temptations in a town like this, and without Christian principle one is never safe. So I hope this sorrow which has made him more gentle and tender, may lead him nearer the living Heavenly Father.

(Fisk, 4-25-1892)

In this entry Elizabeth and her mother discussed Robbie’s moral character. The phrase, “he gives cause for undue anxiety,” which appeared to be a direct quote from her mother’s previous letter, is an ambiguous statement whose meaning appeared to be shared by mother and daughter. The next sentence sheds some light on this phrase when Elizabeth wrote, “He has never done that, but a boy or young man is constantly exposed to many temptations in a town like this.” This sentence with its singular emphasis on “done that,” followed by the reference to temptations, could apply to Robbie’s sexual experiences in Helena. However, only mother and daughter could truly interpret this through their shared meaning of “done that,” “good man,” and “undue anxiety.” Whether the phrase refers to sexual experiences or just temptations in general, the
antidote for this was the “Christian principles” which kept Robbie safe from temptation. Expanding on her definition of Christian principle and the effect his girlfriend’s death had on him, Elizabeth expressed her hope that this experience would lead Robbie “nearer the living Heavenly Father.” This reference to “living” seemed to show the connection between abstract religious beliefs and God’s presence in society. Elizabeth’s strong religious beliefs are communicated again to her mother through a narrative about the challenges her son faces in life. In the letters analyzed, Elizabeth’s religious beliefs were communicated indirectly through comments regarding others and what their beliefs should be. This style showed the knowledge Elizabeth possessed regarding religious concepts and how she disclosed her private religious beliefs without an overt expression of them. By indirectly communicating these beliefs she presented an image of a religious woman to her mother. By her piety she continued to present an image of a proper nineteenth-century woman.

As a proper Christian woman of that era, Elizabeth also had strong views on such vices as dancing and drinking. Dancing, an activity that would put young men and women in close proximity to each other, violated the definition of purity. These views were illustrated many times in the narratives she told of the people and activities in Helena. These beliefs made up the sub-theme, Preaching About the Vices of Drinking and Dancing.

Preaching About the Vices of Drinking and Dancing

Elizabeth expressed her strong views on the evils of drinking and dancing through the stories she told of others. Within these narratives she expressed her opinions on the corruptness of these vices. This is another example of Elizabeth’s work in presenting a
coherent self to her mother. The most demonstrative example of this occurred when Elizabeth spoke to her mother about the Methodist Church Fair Committee and its idea to have dancing at the upcoming fair:

Instead of coming out boldly and saying, "We will not have dancing because it is contrary to the discipline of our church," or else taking the responsibility of the dancing notwithstanding the discipline, it was proposed to let three or four gentlemen run the dance hall and turn over the proceeds to the church trustees. I told the ladies that to me it was a very mean way of doing business and at length my patience gave out and I advised them to rent a dance hall on Main Street, employ the hurdy girls and then open a faro bank. (Fisk, 1-19-1872)

In this instance Elizabeth was exasperated because nobody would take a firm Christian stand on dancing. It was against the teachings of the church, but nobody would voice this. Then to make matters worse, the committee decided to offer dancing but went about it in a way that the church will not be directly associated with it. The committee wanted the funds the dance would generate but did not want it to appear that the committee was sponsoring the dance. Elizabeth’s reference to her patience wearing out and her statement on dancing halls and the hurdy girls (dancing girls who provided entertainment for men by playing a musical instrument called a hurdy-gurdy) indicated her strong negative views on dancing. Her reference to a faro bank (a card game with betting involved) showed her negative views on gambling as well as dancing. She continued on in this letter to tell her mother, "Having held my position and fought my battle I came home" (Fisk, 1-19-1892). This position, which Elizabeth spoke so strongly about, was
her strong moral conviction that dancing was against the teachings of the church and did not promote the value of purity. Her religious background and education would not allow her to compromise her values and beliefs on dancing. Dancing was wrong. As the lone holdout she did not buckle to peer pressure and stood firm in her beliefs. This showed the firmness of her convictions and contributed to her image as a pious, moral woman.

Drinking was a problem in the west. Jeffrey insists that “There, the weakness of institutionalized restraints and the drudgery of so much of frontier life may well have fostered excessive private drinking” (185). Elizabeth shared her views with her mother regarding alcohol consumption. In discussing the effect of drinking on James Walker, a family man who embezzled money, she said, “He seems to have no sense of the wrong of which he has been guilty, his moral nature is so perverted by drink ....” (Fisk, 9-18-1892). Clearly, Elizabeth viewed whiskey as evil. Drinking was immoral and it perverted an individual’s character. The evils of alcohol would cause individuals to do things that were wrong. She implied that the evils of whiskey had bankrupted the morality of this man. Elizabeth communicated her strong views and in doing so contributed to her image of a temperate woman.

In addition to her religious beliefs, Elizabeth continued to expand her mind by reading various books and periodicals. She wrote to her mother about these books and also exchanged magazines with her mother whenever possible. These entries make up the sub-theme, Expanding her Literary Horizons.
Expanding Her Literary Horizons

Elizabeth read books and magazines when she had time to keep up with the current events of the day. Present within these literary works was the continuing definition of the civilizing woman. Jeffrey maintains: “The rapid appearance of Eastern papers, magazines, and novels on the frontier ensured that literate women would be reminded of their mission as mothers of civilization” (84). Elizabeth described what she read to her mother. She said, “Last week I enjoyed quite a treat in the shape of a new book. It is entitled ‘Queen of the Country’ and is a well written, simple story of English home life. Scribners, the February and March numbers are awaiting me tonight. Are you reading them this year? …” (Fisk, 3-12-1877). In this entry we learn that Elizabeth has read a book in the last week for pleasure. The book’s message did not appear to be anything deep and thought provoking, but rather, as Elizabeth said, “a simple story of English home life.” Its message may have reinforced the role of women within the home. Elizabeth’s reference to Scribners and the February and March issues indicated that she subscribed to and read the current periodicals of the day. Her question regarding her mother’s reading of Scribners illustrated the similar tastes mother and daughter had for magazines. Elizabeth most likely was continually reminded of her duties as a proper woman by these eastern magazines.

Elizabeth also subscribed to women’s magazines and shared them with her mother. These magazines were acceptable reading material since they would not interfere with her duties within the home. Welter contends that “The women’s magazines themselves could be read without any loss of concern for the home. Godey’s promised the husband that he would find his wife ‘no less assiduous for his reception, or less
sincere in welcoming his return’ as a result of reading their magazine” (34). Two magazines which Elizabeth had access to were Cosmopolitan and Ladies Home Journal: “Will send Cosmopolitan for Apr. & May and Ladies Home Journal ....”(Fisk, 6-6-1892).

It appeared from this entry that Elizabeth and her mother had a common interest in the magazines of the day. The message in these magazines may have reminded her of her role as a “mother of civilization” (Jeffrey 84) while not taking her away from her domestic role.

Elizabeth read novels in addition to simple books and magazines. Novels presented their own threat to maintaining the values of a nineteenth-century woman. Welter wrote that “The seduction stories regard ‘exciting and dangerous’ books as contributory causes of disaster” (34). This disaster historian Barbara Welter spoke of, was to ‘unsettle them [women] for their true station and pursuits, and they will throw the world back again into confusion’” (34). Elizabeth spoke to her mother about her interest in such a book:

After many weeks I finished Les Miserables and did enjoy it so much. As a rule French novels are forbidden books, but this is so grand, so thrilling in passage. Sometimes I found myself holding my breath, scarcely daring to read further, yet unwilling to lay the book aside ...” (Fisk, 3-7-1892)

This reading material was telling in its qualifier that the novel was a “forbidden book” yet its contents kept Elizabeth in rapt attention. She did not expand on whose “rule” it was, but perhaps it was her understanding of the appropriate literature Welter described, that established the unwritten rule. However, at the age of 46 this mature woman found the forbidden nature of the book acceptable and shared her opinion of its “thrilling passages”
with her mother. Her very descriptive prose, "sometimes I found myself holding my
breath, scarcely daring to read further, yet unwilling to lay the book aside,"
communicated to her mother the intensity of the book and how it gripped her. This entry
illustrated that Elizabeth’s reading habits included not only women’s magazines and
simple books, but French novels as well. Elizabeth’s image of a mature, well read
nineteenth century woman is communicated to her mother.

The picture of a moral, temperate, Christian woman who was steadfast in her
beliefs and continued to expand her mind is the image that Elizabeth Fisk worked hard at
communicating to her mother. In these passages we see the expression of the nineteenth-
century’s vision of a proper woman. We also see the tension in meeting this definition.
The nineteenth-century image of a pious woman was threatened by incompetent
ministers, unacceptable churches, and weak church committees. Elizabeth’s role as
moral guardian was challenged when she attempted to educate the young people in the
community about the importance of God. As a nineteenth-century woman who valued
purity Elizabeth was upset that others did not hold her strong views on the immorality of
dancing in the community.

In addition to Elizabeth’s pious and pure image, she also communicated to her
mother her role as homemaker. These entries showed Elizabeth “keeping house” –
another requirement of a proper nineteenth-century woman. This role was communicated
to her mother throughout the text and represents the third major theme identified in the
analysis, Managing the Family Home Well.

This theme showed the challenges and successes Elizabeth felt while trying to
maintain the nineteenth-century woman’s value of domesticity. Elizabeth recognized her
duty to maintain the family home and either did the work herself or hired others. Her status as a middle-class woman allowed her to present an image of a tastefully decorated and landscaped home. She had the financial resources to hire domestic help to assist her with the management of the home. Tension arose however, when the domestic help she hired did not meet her standards.

**Managing the Family Home Well**

Elizabeth wrote to her mother often about her duties as homemaker. Her descriptive prose regarding the home and its furnishings and the narratives regarding the maintenance of the home and the servants she employed allowed her mother to see the "domestic" image of her daughter. The image of Elizabeth as manager of her home can be compared to the views of Catharine Beecher. Beecher, an eastern woman, wrote frequently about women’s proper roles in the nineteenth century. In her book, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, literary critic Annette Kolodny spoke of Beecher’s views of housewifery. Beecher defined housewifery as a “woman’s distinctive profession” (Kolodny 165). Kolodny wrote:

> Summarizing two decades of speaking and writing on these subjects for an 1865 article in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Beecher defined the new domestic professionalism as “include[ing] three departments—the training of the mind in childhood, the nursing of infants and of the sick, and all the handicrafts and management of the family state. (165-66).

It is the third department of Beecher’s definition, “all the handicrafts and management of the family state,” which appeared as a theme in the letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk.
These letters showed the hard work involved and the many challenges Elizabeth faced in trying to manage her home on the western frontier.

The theme of Managing the Family Home fell into four sub-themes: Maintaining a Clean, Warm Home, Challenges and Successes with Domestic Help, Furnishing an Elegant Home, and Creating a Beautiful Exterior.

Maintaining a Clean, Warm Home

Elizabeth described for her mother the work involved in keeping her home clean and also the challenges the harsh Montana environment presented. She contrasted the warmth and cleanliness of her home with the outside elements of the frontier. With temperatures down in the twenties she said, “with a fire night and day we are, indoors, insensible to the changes in temperature” (Fisk, 12-22-1872). With this diligence her home was warm and her family insulated from the cold Montana winter. Maintaining the home also presented challenges to Elizabeth. She said, “We are having our house painted and the dust has not improved the appearances of the new paint at all” (Fisk, 7-23-1877). In this entry Elizabeth described the effort made to maintain her home by painting it. Unfortunately, some type of dust storm occurred and the dust sticks to the newly painted house.

Elizabeth communicated to her mother the hard work involved in accomplishing the annual spring cleaning:

We did get through with the cleaning in fine style. I had plenty of help and was compelled to work as rapidly as possible as I had to take up the dining room carpet and make it over for the boy’s room upstairs .....The day the kitchen was cleaned was the hardest for the side walls had to be
scraped and everything was so dirty and full of bits of white wash. (Fisk, 5-23-1887)

In this example a major effort at spring-cleaning occurs with the carpets being taken up and the kitchen walls being painted. Her reference to “plenty of help” indicated that there were others who helped with the cleaning. Even with the assistance of others, though, Elizabeth gave her mother the impression that she worked hard when she said that she “was compelled to work as rapidly as possible.” In this example, the old paint in the kitchen, which “had to be scraped,” presented a new cleaning challenge since it created more work because “everything was so dirty and full of bits of white wash.” This cleaning session, however, accomplished its goal, when Elizabeth wrote later in the letter, “The house looks very nice from garret to cellar. It is a comfort to know the work is all done and well done and everything in the house in order” (Fisk, 5-23-1887). The image of a clean home is communicated to her mother when she says “the house looks very nice from garret to cellar.” Also telling was her comment that it is “well done and everything in the house in order,” indicating that the cleaning met Elizabeth’s expectations. The vision of a clean orderly home, fresh from its spring-cleaning, can be seen by Mrs. Chester through the eyes of her western daughter. Through this entry Elizabeth communicated to her mother an image of a woman who worked hard to keep her house is “in order.”

In addition to the annual spring-cleaning rituals to maintain her vision of a clean, orderly home, Elizabeth also wrote to her mother about the domestic help she employed to keep her home up to the standards and image she desired. These narratives represent the second sub-theme of Challenges and Successes with Domestic Help.
Challenges and Successes with Domestic Help

In describing the homes of wealthier women historian Elliot West asserts that "In maintaining these homes and caring for their children, wealthier mothers usually could afford the help of domestics" (184). Elizabeth could afford domestic help and she wrote to her mother often about the domestic help she employed. Through the narratives regarding their work, we see Elizabeth's opinions on how her expectations are or are not being met to keep her home up to the standards she expects. Negative evaluations of their work indicated perhaps their lack of shared vision with Elizabeth on what constituted a clean, orderly home. Positive evaluations were communicated when the work and home met Elizabeth's strict guidelines. Through these entries Mrs. Chester learned of her daughter's standards for maintaining a clean, orderly home, communicating to her mother the image of Elizabeth as manager of her family home.

Elizabeth had high standards for the domestic servants she hired. They must know what was expected of them and accomplish their duties without bothering Elizabeth. This was illustrated when Elizabeth said: "Our house is not very large and I must have my kitchen so that I can sit down in it without sticking fast; since Ah Gim has been here it has either been so dirty that I could not go into it or else so damp from cleaning and scrubbing that it was unsafe to venture about" (Fisk, 11-19-1882). In this example Elizabeth's desire to go into her own kitchen was thwarted by the stickiness of the kitchen floor. Ah Gim is either not doing his job and the home is dirty, or he is so overzealous that the floor is wet and dangerous. Elizabeth complained about Ah Gim to her mother in an earlier letter: "After the Chinese boy came it was of course a little easier, but he was ignorant of every detail of housekeeping and needed some one with him
constantly” (Fisk, 9-14-1882). In this entry Elizabeth expressed her frustration at having to closely supervise Ah Gim. She expected him to know what to do and was not pleased that he was “ignorant of every detail of housekeeping.” His work was not acceptable. By indicating Ah Gim is “ignorant” of his housekeeping duties Elizabeth indirectly communicated to her mother, her knowledge of housekeeping duties. Elizabeth knew what was required to keep a good house.

A second example of Elizabeth’s displeasure with Helena’s domestic servants occurred in September of 1887: “Here they are growing more worthless and independent than ever. Demand thirty dollars per month, will do no washing and expect to go out every evening, and to church twice on Sunday” (Fisk, 9-24-1887). In this entry Elizabeth described what she considered the general worthlessness of domestic servants by explaining to her mother that they “will do no washing.” Perhaps the independence of her domestic help, which Elizabeth does not value as an employer, is expressed in the statement of the help’s wish to “go out every evening, and to church twice on Sunday.” In addition to not completing the duties necessary to maintain the home, these servants perhaps do not recognize who is the employer and who is the employee. Financial matters were also an issue. Elizabeth found thirty dollars per month “demanding.”

Through these negative evaluations, Elizabeth communicated her opinions on the work domestic servants should do in helping her to keep house. The tension in keeping a clean house on the western frontier is evident in these entries.

While the negative entries give an idea of what were unacceptable qualities in domestic servants and how their work prevented the creation of the image of a clean, orderly home, positive references gave a clear indication of what was acceptable. In
writing about a German girl she had hired, Elizabeth said, “She is not an experienced cook but is good-natured and willing and neat. She has been trained to think her time belongs to her employer and came to me for sewing and knitting when her household duties were accomplished” (Fisk, 10-6-1887). This entry indicated the hard work ethic that Elizabeth expected of her servants. Her comment that “her time belongs to her employer” indicated that she expected the girl to work 100 percent of the time and to serve at the behest of her employer. Elizabeth was also pleased that the girl took some initiative to ask for additional work. Elizabeth liked the work this servant did in keeping her home clean and neat. Elizabeth expressed a positive view of another servant when she said, “Her kitchen fairly shines, her work is neatly and quietly done, her meals ready at the minute, in short, I don’t know how I kept house without her” (Fisk, 9-15-1872). This entry showed again the positive attributes Elizabeth valued in her hired help. This entry was interesting because Elizabeth said, “her kitchen fairly shines,” indicating that the workspace of the kitchen perhaps belonged to her domestic servant. The fact that it “fairly shines” showed the degree to which it was cleaned was acceptable to Elizabeth. That the servant’s work was “neatly and quietly done” indicated that she was self-motivated and did not require a lot of interaction with Elizabeth. This servant knew what was expected and did not involve her employer in the minutia of the job. “Her meals ready at the minute” could be interpreted to mean that her meals were always on time. Timeliness was perhaps another characteristic which Elizabeth valued as she sought to maintain her home and keep everything running in an orderly manner. Through these positive affirmations of the work her domestic servants did we see Elizabeth communicating to her mother what she expected her home to look like. Through these
visions of her home we see the image of Elizabeth as “manager of the family state” (Kolodny 166).

In addition to the references to cleaning the home and domestic servants, Elizabeth also wrote to her mother about the furnishings and other amenities within her home. Fine furnishings and elegant items appeared to be important to Elizabeth and she described these items to her mother.

**Furnishing an Elegant Home**

Elliott West, in *Beyond Baby Doe: Child Rearing on the Mining Frontier*, asserts that the mining frontier was vastly different for wealthier families: “These wealthier mothers also had resources to furnish their houses to their tastes” (183). Elizabeth’s tastes in furnishing her home were illustrated in her letters home. She described the furniture and other items located within her home. She said, “We want to trade off the old piano for a new upright, but have not yet decided on the ‘make.’ All the Knabe pianos I have seen here have been very cheap instruments. We have talked of a Steinway or a Haynes, and shall soon decide” (Fisk, 5-8-1887). This example showed the qualities Elizabeth was looking for in purchasing a new piano. There would be no cheap musical instruments within the confines of the Fisk home. The fact that the piano is being traded off indicated perhaps that a piano was a “required” object within the home, possibly used to provide entertainment and culture within the home.

Elizabeth also described for her mother a china set she had received. She said, “It was an English dinner service of china white and green. Each piece has a narrow border of the green and either a wreath or cluster of flowers, and there are no two pieces which have the same flowers. It is very pretty I think” (Fisk, 10-28-1877). This example
illustrated again the importance Elizabeth put on items such as fine china. Her vivid
description allowed her mother to see the china set within her daughter’s home. Her
qualifying adjective “pretty” showed the look that the set has. The piano and china set
gave her mother the impression of a finely furnished home on the western frontier.

In addition to maintaining the home, hiring domestic servants, and furnishing her
home Elizabeth also described for her mother the exterior of her home. The vision of a
carefully landscaped home appeared in the following sub-theme, Creating a Beautiful
Exterior.

Creating a Beautiful Exterior

Outside appearances were important to women on the western frontier. Jeffrey
declares that “Outside, women planted flowers and trees from seeds they had brought
with them and generally tried to maintain the standards of domesticity and hospitality
with which they had been familiar before emigration” (73). Elizabeth described in vivid
detail the flowers she planted outside her home and her efforts to maintain them:

You speak of your flowers and plants. I have two small beds in the front
yard which are pretty. I have Candy tuft, phlox, stocks, snap-dragon,
pancies and migmette in bloom and daisies, aster and verbenas breeding
nicely. I did not attempt much but have succeeded nicely and feel well
repaid for all the exertion put forth. (Fisk, 7-23-1877)

In this example Elizabeth was responding to her mother’s letter regarding the flowers she
had blooming in her Connecticut home. Elizabeth attempted to create for her mother an
image of what the exterior of her home in Helena looked like. The variety of flowers
within the two beds showed the planning and creativity with which she planted her flower
garden. This activity helped Elizabeth “maintain the standards of domesticity” she remembered from her home in Connecticut (73). This also served to communicate to her mother that even in the western frontier an abundance and variety of flowers were available to allow a woman to landscape her home beautifully.

Flowers also supported the definition of a true woman. Welter contends that “She was expected to have a special affinity for flowers. To the editors of The Lady’s Token ‘A Woman never appears more truly in her sphere, than when she divides her time between her domestic avocations and the culture of flowers’”(33). Elizabeth’s “affinity for flowers” was illustrated when she said, “I would like to send you a bouquet from my garden this morning, as handsome as the one I arranged for Rob to take to the office. Our flowers are beautiful though not very abundant ....”(Fisk, 8-19-1872). A bouquet of fresh cut, home grown flowers was something she wished she could share with her mother. Fresh cut flowers appeared to be important to Elizabeth.

In summary, Elizabeth worked hard to maintain the nineteenth-century’s vision of a proper woman through her domesticity. Her clean, warm, orderly home with its piano and china set communicated a family whose social standing represented the mid to upper class in Helena. She worked hard to sustain this image of her home either by maintaining it herself or hiring others to do the work. Tension was felt in the letters when her duties as manager of the home produced conflict with the hired help. She fought off the wild elements of Montana’s natural environment with her annual spring-cleaning and managed to keep her family warm from the harsh Montana winters. Elizabeth labored hard at Beecher’s definition of the “management of the family state.” The image she created of her home in Helena was one of a neat, tidy well landscaped home, perhaps not unlike that
of her mother’s in Connecticut. Her house in Helena, Montana was perhaps “just like moms.”

Trying to be a Good Mother

The fourth major theme, which emerged from the letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk, was the theme, Trying to be a Good Mother. Within this theme we see Elizabeth communicating her image as a proper nineteenth-century woman through her domesticity, piety and submissiveness. Her work at creating stylish clothing for the children communicated her attention to her domestic duties as well as the proper look she felt the clothing should create. In training her children for their proper roles within society, Elizabeth communicated her acceptance, perhaps, of the definition of what a proper young woman and man represented. Tension, however, was evident in this theme when Elizabeth complained about the number of children she had. Her submissiveness, another value of a nineteenth-century woman, had resulted in a large family to care for. She also expressed the fear that her role as moral guardian to her children was being thwarted by her children’s exposure to evils outside of her control.

Within this theme of Trying to be a Good Mother, four sub-themes emerged. These themes are: Values and Beliefs on Childrearing, Educating Children on the Frontier, Instilling Good Morals in Children, and Creating Fashionable Clothing for Children. The first sub-theme, Values and Beliefs on Childrearing is detailed below.

Values and Beliefs on Childrearing

Motherhood was an important role in the nineteenth century. Jeffrey maintains that “The nineteenth century defined the regulation of children and the formation of their characters as a mother’s central task” (70). The first indication of Elizabeth’s views on
childrearing and the “regulation of their character” occurred early in her move to Montana. In describing her views on the disciplining of her niece Dell, she said, “Occasionally I speak my mind on the subject of governing children, relating the government of my own estimable mother, but I can’t make much impression” (Fisk, 8-22-1867). In this entry we learn that Elizabeth was vocal regarding her views on childrearing. Even though she has no children of her own at this time she still spoke her mind, but her voice was not heard. By her phrase, “my own estimable mother,” we learn that Elizabeth valued her own mother’s beliefs on the disciplining of children. This phrase could have implied that Elizabeth intended to raise her children based on her mother’s standards.

Childbearing and motherhood were not easy for women on the frontier. In her essay, “Women as Workers, Women as Civilizer: True Womanhood in the American West,” historian Elizabeth Jameson asserts that “The daily realities of western women’s lives were shaped by work and by family concerns related to childbearing and childrearing” (150). The reality of more children weighed heavily on Elizabeth in 1877. Pregnant with her fourth child she said,

Perhaps you would like to know if I am pleased with the prospect of an addition to my cares. I did not want any more children, and there have been times in the last few months when I have felt utterly unreconciled to the state of affairs, and even now I sometimes think I cannot care for any more little ones: but I try to recall the old proverb that “the back is fitted to the burden,” and come to believe that strength will be given for every duty. (Fisk, 10-28-1877)
In this entry Elizabeth emphatically communicated to her mother with her underlining of words her strong displeasure at having more children. In her eighth month of pregnancy she was very unhappy and perhaps on the verge of depression. Another addition to the Fisk family would surely bring more work, which she felt incapable of doing. This entry also illustrated perhaps Elizabeth’s nineteenth century role to be “submissive” sexually to her husband and the tension this has caused. However, in this passage we also learn of Elizabeth’s religious convictions that God will give her the strength to bear this burden. This supported Welter’s assertion that “Religion or piety was the core of woman’s virtue, the source of her strength” (21). As a woman, raised in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth knew that bearing children and raising them was her “duty” and God would provide her with the strength to meet this duty. Another example illustrated Elizabeth’s weariness. Five years later and pregnant with twins, a very depressed Elizabeth wrote:

If I felt really well and like myself I could say many lovely and pleasant things of these fifteen years of my life. But just now it is a good deal of a burden to live at all, and while I know all the “lovely and pleasant things” have been, are still with me, I do not fully appreciate them or feel prepared to say much in their praise. All the love and kindly feelings are in their proper place and will, some day, reassert themselves …… (Fisk, 3-28-1882)

Tired, weary, and pregnant again Elizabeth was burdened with the thought of just living. She is physically and emotionally exhausted. She knew there were many things to be thankful for, but cannot see them at the moment. Her comment that “all the love and kindly feelings are in their proper place” indicated that she realized that these despondent
feelings are temporary and that she would be free of them some day. When these feelings leave she would be able to live again. This entry contradicted the nineteenth century’s view of women’s uncomplaining, submissive persona. Quoting from Godey’s, a popular book of the day, Welter says: “As Godey’s said, ‘the lesson of submission is forced upon women.’ Without comment or criticism the writer affirms that ‘To suffer and to be silent under suffering seems the great command she has to obey.’” (30-31). Contrary to what was expected of a nineteenth-century female, Elizabeth was not silent regarding her suffering.

Jameson speaks of the hard work the western frontier required of women. She writes, “Western women expected and found lives shaped largely by family responsibilities and hard work” (160). Elizabeth spoke to her mother about the work involved in raising her family.

In addition to bearing children, educating them was also one of the challenges mothers faced on the western frontier. Lacking the schooling opportunities available in the east, families had to accept what was offered. Elizabeth brought with her a perspective that other mothers may not have had. Before moving to Montana Elizabeth received a formal education and was a teacher herself (Myers 1). With this background, her expectations of schoolteachers and education were high. Elizabeth also spoke about the subjects her children were taught, such as music and foreign languages. The sub-theme, Educating Children on the Frontier, recounts Elizabeth’s views on teaching children and the subjects they were taught.
Educating Children on the Frontier

The frontier brought with it the challenges of hiring qualified teachers (Jeffrey 88). This challenge was noted by Elizabeth when she said about her son Clarke,

He has not done well in school this year, has taken a violent dislike to his teacher and I cannot blame him much for she is not agreeable. He has never before uttered a word of complaint but has been a diligent pupil and made good progress. But now I believe the dislike was mutual for she was always saying he was sullen and stubborn and her constant irritation was fast making him so. (Fisk, 1-22-1887)

From this entry we see Elizabeth voicing her concern regarding the relationship Clarke had with his teacher. While he continued to learn his lessons, his demeanor changed at school and she attributed this to the interaction between Clarke and his teacher. The teacher’s “constant irritation,” perhaps nagging, set up a conflict between the two. Elizabeth considered the teacher “not agreeable” and expanded on this description later in the letter: “There is so much in stroking people the right way, men and boys especially.” In her words, “stroking” or praising boys will motivate them better than nagging. Elizabeth’s story of her children’s education showed that Elizabeth believed it was better to praise and encourage students for their hard work than to scold them for their poor work. This entry exposed the tension Elizabeth felt in having her children educated with methods she did not agree with.

Because of the family’s financial position the Fisk children were exposed to finer subjects, such as music and foreign languages. In responding to her mother’s inquiry as to whether there are more musicians in the family, Elizabeth explained, “Florence will
have a piano as soon as she is a littler older” and “Jamie wants a violin” (Fisk, 4-25-1892). Later in the letter she boasted of the children’s ability to read music and draw. Elizabeth implied that besides the subjects of reading and writing, she considered the advancement of musical and artistic talent to be important in the children’s education and development. Elizabeth also considered foreign languages to be an appropriate subject for her children to learn. She wrote, “This German lesson, independent of the regular school course, is to teach her [Grace] to converse in that language. She already reads and writes it with considerable ease” (Fisk, 10-17-1882). In this entry we see Elizabeth talking about the addition of a subject other than the basic three R’s. The fact that these classes were held outside of school indicated the importance Elizabeth put on this subject, as well as perhaps the fact that she and Robert had the financial resources to provide for this additional education. The Fisks provided every opportunity available to advance their children’s education.

In addition to Elizabeth’s views on bearing children and their formal education she also talked about their moral development and her duty to ensure that they were raised with the proper values and beliefs. The sub-theme, Instilling Good Morals in Children, illustrates how seriously Elizabeth took this duty.

Instilling Good Morals in Children

Elizabeth wrote to her mother about her fears regarding the children’s moral development. Jeffrey asserts that “The nineteenth century defined the regulation of children and the formation of their character as a mother’s central task” (70). This task was not easy to fulfill with the temptations the frontier offered. In describing her duty to the children’s moral development Elizabeth said, “It is difficult to realize they are all
growing up so fast, and in a few years will be beyond the influence of the home life. The thought is an added incentive to faithfulness in every duty” (Fisk, 8-21-1887). Elizabeth expressed her fears to her mother that once the children leave home they may be exposed to bad influences. However, Elizabeth’s remedy to this fear was to work as hard as she could to fulfill her duty as moral educator of her children. Another example of her children’s exposure to the ills of society was expressed when she said, “I feel every day more fully convinced that I will not again send a child to a public school. In doing so one exposes them to every ill that flesh is heir to, to say nothing of the many disagreeable habits they acquire” (Fisk, 2-26-1877). Elizabeth expressed her fears that her children’s moral development was being threatened by forces outside the home.

Social, as well as moral issues of the day, were also important to Elizabeth. West claims that through purchasing books and reading them in the home parents reinforced the social issues of the day: “This instruction was typically laced with moral and cultural lessons of the day” (189). This was illustrated when Elizabeth said, “I have been reading Uncle Tom’s Cabin to the younger children, another step in their education” (Fisk, 9-25-1892). This entry regarding Uncle Tom’s Cabin appeared after a reference in the letter to a reunion of her husband’s Civil War military unit. In speaking of her son Jamie accompanying his father to this reunion, she wrote, “I was glad Jamie should see this grand parade, should understand something of the struggle in which these brave men were engaged and learn of the hardships they endured to free our country from slavery” (Fisk, 9-25-1892). This entry showed how important it was to Elizabeth that her son learned of his father’s strong stand against slavery. Elizabeth believed her children should be educated both in subjects taught in school and in the Republican social issues
of the day. Elizabeth was willing to do whatever it took to ensure these teachings were disseminated.

In addition to Elizabeth’s views on child rearing, her children’s formal education and moral education, she also worked hard at creating clothing for them so they would look good. The fourth sub-theme of Creating Fashionable Clothing for Children is described below.

Creating Fashionable Clothing for Children

Elizabeth spoke frequently to her mother about her children’s clothing and the stylish look the clothing created. Elizabeth’s vivid descriptions of the clothing she made for her children communicated the view of a mother who wanted her children to look good. By producing appropriate clothing for her children Elizabeth also contributed to the establishment of a “proper society” on the frontier (Jeffrey 86). Her concern for proper clothing extended even to her baby: “I ought to tell you about our baby’s wardrobe. He has such beautiful clothes, and looks so nice in them ….He has Grace’s little slips and dresses for common wear and three elegant robes for ‘high times and Sundays’” (Fisk, 12-22-1872). Her references to “common wear” represented the practical, useful side of clothing. However, the phrases, “he has such beautiful clothes and looks so nice in them” and “three elegant robes for high times and Sundays,” showed the importance she placed on the image Robbie represented, particularly in public settings. Another entry talked about a coat she made for her daughter Florence: “the weather was a little colder last week and Florence had no coat so I worked at the new one busily till that was finished. I was able to squeeze out a long cape so the garment is quite stylish and looks very well” (Fisk, 10-24-1892). In this entry the first sentence, referred
to need for warm winter clothing. The second part of this sentence and the first part of
the following sentence showed the time and effort involved by the words “busily” and
“squeeze.” In the final part of the second sentence Elizabeth showed she was concerned
about her children being fashionable by saying that the coat was “quite stylish and looks
very well.” These two sentences provided an immense amount of information to
Elizabeth’s mother. They communicated a daughter who was mindful of the needs of her
family, worked hard to fill those needs, and sought to meet the needs by creating
fashionable clothing. In this entry we see Elizabeth being “domestic” and creating “a
proper society” (Jeffrey 86) through the clothing she makes for her children.

In addition to her views on child rearing, her children’s formal and moral
education and their clothing, Elizabeth also worked hard to instill the proper work ethic
in them. The Fisk children would learn the value of hard work and what their expected
duties would be in life. The sub-theme, Teaching Children the Value of Hard Work, is
detailed below.

Teaching Children the Value of Hard Work

Jeffrey alleges that in the west, “Women expressed disapproval of idleness and
indolence in children and sought to encourage them to be useful” (71). Elizabeth
illustrated this in her letters when she discussed the work her children did: “The boys
have plenty of “chores” this cold weather though we lighten the work for them by giving
a tramp a few hours work at shoveling snow or filling up the wood shed” (Fisk, 2-11-
1887). From this entry it appeared that doing chores and hard work was an attribute that
Elizabeth placed a high value on and tried to instill in her children. The workload was
lightened a bit by the assistance of a “tramp,” but there was still work to be done.
As a mother in the later half of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth also illustrated two very distinctive expectations for her children. Grace was expected to follow in the role of caregiver and homemaker and the boys were expected to earn a living and be in business. West professes that the philosophy of child rearing present in the cities of the northeast spread to the west. This principle proscribed that “Daughters should learn to be efficient and virtuous keepers of the hearth, sons to be aggressive but honest lords of the marketplace” (187). In describing the boys’ work Elizabeth said:

What to do with our boys this summer is the serious question at present. Clarke will be in school another month and Asa is at work in the Candy factory. I cannot tell how long he will hold out, but it keeps him out of mischief for the time. Robbie is still unsettled but I hope to find something which will occupy him a part of every day. He and Clarke each carry a paper route, but that takes only a short time in the evening, so I am racking my brain to discover something interesting, safe and profitable.

(Fisk, 6-5-1887)

At the time of this letter Clarke was twelve and Asa was ten. The phrase, “what to do with our boys this summer,” indicated in this letter that the Fisk boys would not spend their free time in the summer playing and relaxing. Elizabeth’s comment regarding Asa’s job that it “keeps him out of mischief for the time” indicated her belief in the old adage, “idle hands are the devil’s handiwork.” The phrase, “I am racking my brain to discover something interesting, safe and profitable,” indicated that Elizabeth considered it one of her duties as a mother to find appropriate work for her children. The qualifiers in this phrase, “interesting, safe and profitable” showed the qualifications that any job would
have to meet in order to be considered by Elizabeth. She did not want her children to be bored by the drudgery of a meaningless job and she also wanted them to be safe. The qualifier “profitable” indicated the business aspect of the job. Her children would earn money. These jobs did not come without some type of compensation. At the young ages of ten and twelve the young Fisk boys would learn the value of hard work and its rewards.

This same summer, while the boys are outside the home earning money, Grace was concentrating on her domestic skills. Elizabeth said, “The domestic traits which Grace is developing astonish and please me. She looks after the children, helps in every thing which is to be done no matter how disagreeable the task and is such a comfort in every way” (Fisk, 8-21-1887). Elizabeth was pleased with her daughter’s development regarding her domestic duties. Grace was learning the skills she needs to remain within the “domestic sphere.”

Elizabeth believed perhaps that the boys should be busy working outside the home while Grace should remain content to be inside it. This confirmed the nineteenth-century definition of women and men. Through these comments about her children’s work we see the children being raised to work within their “proper” sphere, the boys outside the home and Grace inside.

In summary, Elizabeth’s letters spoke of the challenges mothers faced on the western frontier maintaining their proper values of domesticity, submissiveness and piety. Raising children was a very real burden. It was hard work. Raising educated children with a dearth of qualified teachers was a challenge. Mothers could expand on their children’s training and development by exposing their children to music and foreign
languages if financial resources permitted. Producing fashionable clothing kept the children looking good. Outside activities and chores would keep them out of trouble and instill in them the “proper” work ethic based on their gender.

Elizabeth also communicated to her mother a mother’s worst fear, that even with a mother’s hard work her children would not develop the way she expected them to. Children exposed to the ills of society would fall into a bad state. The image of a hard working mother who feared for her children’s safety and development contributed to Elizabeth’s “coherent image”.

In addition to Elizabeth’s image as mother, she also communicated her image as a politically astute woman. This represents the final theme, Becoming Politically Astute and Involved in Social Causes.

Becoming Politically Astute and Involved in Social Causes

The fifth and final theme to emerge from the letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk was her political astuteness and activism. As the wife of the editor of the Republican newspaper Elizabeth followed the current politics of the day and became involved in social issues. It is within this theme that we see Elizabeth veering from the acceptable “domestic sphere” to activities outside the home. She chose to go against Welter’s assertion that a woman should “... not look away from her own little family circle for the means of producing moral and social reforms ...” (33). Tension is evident within this theme as Elizabeth was faced with defending her outside activities.

The final theme, Becoming Politically Astute and Involved in Social Causes, was illustrated in Elizabeth’s references to political issues and political functions she attended. In her later years with the children grown she became very active with outside
organizations and women’s issues. Four sub-themes emerged from this major theme:
Discussing Politicians, Attempting to Relieve the Suffering of the Poor, Becoming Active in Women’s Causes, and Defending her Outside Activities. The first sub-theme, Discussing Politicians is detailed below.

Discussions Politicians

Some historians note that women were excluded from political events because they had no vote (Jameson 145). This exclusion was not true with Elizabeth. Because of her husband’s involvement with the Republican Party, and his job as editor of the Republican newspaper, Elizabeth attended political events and was aware of political issues. This political activity took her outside the “domestic sphere.”

Elizabeth spoke to her mother about politicians shortly after her arrival in Montana. In describing Territorial Governor Green Clay Smith she said,

He has been spending a few days in Helena, and every evening has been thoroughly intoxicated and in this condition has attempted to address groups of the citizens, chiefly Democrats, who were assembled to know the illustrious man. He has thoroughly disgusted all loyal men and his departure from this country would be considered for the country’s good..... (Fisk, 8-7-1867)

With this entry we see Elizabeth was already talking about the politics of the day and her political views. She communicated her lack of support for Smith who was a Union Democrat (Malone 81). As a strong Republican her reference to “illustrious man” could be interpreted to be a sarcastic comment. That he had “thoroughly disgusted all loyal men,” showed perhaps that even the Democrats could not tolerate this man. Her
statement that "his departure from this country would be considered for the country's good" showed her strong political views that this man was not a politician who would be good for the Territory of Montana.

Another entry showed Elizabeth describing a political event she attended. She said:

The day is proving quite sunny so the republicans may yet win. We went to hear Miss Knowles speak one evening last week, the People's party candidate for Attorney Gen. It was simply disgusting. She swung her arms and opened her mouth and yelled. No other word expresses it. (Fisk, 11-8-1892)

In this instance Elizabeth indicated her interest in politics by attending a speech given by the Populist Party candidate. Her descriptive prose about the gestures and vocal action of the candidate, "She swung her arms and opened her mouth and yelled," showed her mother perhaps the lack of credibility this candidate had in Elizabeth's eyes. There is no mention of the message delivered only the obscene oratory display described by Elizabeth. These entries showed again Elizabeth's strong Republican loyalty and her knowledge of the politics of the day. Involvement in politics was a significant part of the Fisk family and Elizabeth participated in this through her attendance at political speeches. There was no political void in Elizabeth's life in Montana

In addition to Elizabeth's participation in political rallies and her comments regarding the activities of politicians, she also became involved politically with the social causes of the day. This was expressed in her activities supporting the less fortunate in
Helena and is represented by the sub-theme, Attempting to Relieve the Suffering of the Poor.

**Attempting to Relieve the Suffering of the Poor**

Elizabeth’s social work took her outside of the traditional nineteenth-century “domestic sphere” of a “proper” woman. This contradiction was noted by Jameson: “women had to leave the domestic sphere for public action to achieve the moral authority they were told they should exercise” (159). Elizabeth moved outside this sphere to relieve the suffering of the poor in Helena.

This activity on Elizabeth’s part supports history professor Peggy Pascoe’s assertion that “Middle-class and elite women, inspired by evangelical faith in human perfectibility or by a sense of *noblesse oblige*, provided charity for people left adrift in the burgeoning, and often bewildering, commercial urban environment” (3). Elizabeth’s sense of responsibility to the “people left adrift” was illustrated in her membership in Helena’s Poor Committee in 1887. The Committee’s purpose was to provide assistance to Helena’s needy population by acting in the role of a “welfare department” (Petrik 62). In describing her activities Elizabeth said, “in came Mrs. Rumley with reports of several new cases for the consideration of the Poor Committee. So off I went, for the weather is extremely cold and people suffering for wood or food need prompt attention ....” (Fisk, 2-11-1887). In this entry, the phrase, “So off I went,” indicated perhaps the freedom Elizabeth had with her time in 1887. With no infants to care for and the older children at home it appeared it was possible for her to become involved with groups outside of the family home and to leave at a moment’s notice.
Another example showed her concern for Helena’s poor. She described a visit she and her daughter Grace made:

We found two sisters, living in one room, one with a baby twenty months old, the other with a babe of three days. A red hot cook stove, a table, two chairs and two beds filled the miserable little room. I could hardly see how the poor creatures could wish to get well. The baby was the merest atom, weighing less than three pounds, and even for this mite there was no provision and the kindness of neighbors had supplied the necessary clothing. (Fisk, 12-18-1887)

Living under horrible conditions these two sisters had to rely on the generosity of the Poor Committee for their survival. This entry indicated that Elizabeth had now involved her daughter Grace in the activities of the Poor Committee.

In addition to the social causes involving the poor and destitute of Helena, Elizabeth also focused her energies on specific issues that affected women. These issues were taken up by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.), of which she was a member. The sub-theme, Becoming Active in Women’s Causes, shows Elizabeth’s active participation in these causes.

Becoming Active in Women’s Causes

In her book, No Step Backward, Paula Petrik followed Elizabeth’s political activist role in Montana by analyzing her letters from 1867 to 1893. In this book she contends that Elizabeth had transformed herself from mother and homemaker to political activist. Petrik writes: “Sane motherhood and domestic well-being, Elizabeth came to believe, required that women be involved in the world beyond the home” (Petrik 95).
Political activism was an escape from the drudgery of maintaining “the family state” (Kolodny 165). Elizabeth sought this escape by involving herself in the political activities of establishing a home for single women and testifying before the Montana Territorial Legislature regarding the age of rape.

Elizabeth spoke in her letters about her membership in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) and the work it did in addition to fighting alcohol use. Petrik recognized that Elizabeth’s membership in the W.C.T.U. expanded her political activism: “Under the banner of temperance, Elizabeth moved from informal political activity to formal political activism, from a single issue to a broad-based program of social reform which she shared with like-minded female reformers” (85-6). In speaking of these programs, Pascoe alleges:

While their projects took many forms, the most common was the establishment of rescue homes, institutions designed to provide a loving, homelike atmosphere in which unfortunate women rescued from predatory men might live under the watchful eyes of white, middle-class Protestant women. (xvi)

One of the W.C.T.U.’s programs that Elizabeth was involved with was the establishment of a home for women. Elizabeth noted, “There are often girls coming here in search of work who are friendless and who need some place where they can stay without going to a Hotel or public place. These girls sometimes fall into bad company and are ruined” (Fisk. 2-11-1887). The phrase, “there are often girls coming here in search of work,” indicated that the city of Helena has transformed itself from a mining town with mainly male inhabitants to a place for young women to seek work. That these women were
"friendless" indicated that quite likely they were single, traveling alone or had no relatives in Helena. The W.C.T.U wanted to provide a safe haven for them to prevent these women from being exposed to the "bad company" of Helena and keep them pure.

Elizabeth described how the home would be run: "We want to put some good women of years of experience in charge of the place and as the institution grows shall hope to have a place for poor and friendless old women, where they may find rest and comfort in the last remaining years of life" (Fisk, 2-11-1887). Her reference in this entry regarding "some good women of years of experience" indicated that a more mature woman with proper morals would be the matriarch of the home. This woman perhaps would provide a proper role model for the younger women of the home.

Elizabeth's most public activity outside the domestic sphere in 1887 involved a change to Montana law regarding the definition of rape. She explained the situation to her mother:

The temperance people will attempt something in the way of legislation. We are already circulating two petitions, one for a local option law and the other for the protection of women, changing the age at which a girl may consent to her own ruin from ten to eighteen years. Much needed legislation is it not? (Fisk, 1-9-1887)

In order to get the definition of rape changed from age 10 to 18, Elizabeth testified before the committee reviewing the legislation. This work was not done without some personal trepidation. She expanded on this testimony when she wrote to her mother in February: "I cannot tell you how hard it was to go before this committee one of who was the cranky bachelor and talk about these things" (Fisk, 2-22-1887). For a mature, proper, Christian
woman in her early 40’s with her own personal knowledge of sex to guide her, she found it uncomfortable to talk about such things. This did not deter her, however, in her strong determination to educate the members of this committee on the issue at hand. The young girls of Montana lacked the maturity and ability to defend their morality, but Elizabeth Fisk provided that voice. Elizabeth summed up her feelings to her mother on this subject when she said of some school mates of her daughter Grace who were ruined: “and so for them and thousands of others like them I tried to be brave” (Fisk, 2-22-1887).

Elizabeth’s views confirm Payne’s opinion in Between Ourselves, Letters Between Mothers and Daughters. Payne wrote: “For hundreds of years women have challenged the notion that ‘a woman’s place is in the home,’ not merely out of an ideal of justice and equality, but because they have had capabilities which demanded action and refused to be quenched” (Payne xvi). Elizabeth recognized that she had the capability to speak for the young girls of Montana and she “refused to be quenched” by her own fears or the “cranky bachelor.”

This political activist role brought with it some conflict within Elizabeth’s home. Her work outside the home challenged family member’s views of the work she was doing within the home. This issue is described in the final sub-theme, Defending her Outside Activities.

Defending her Outside Activities

Elizabeth wrote to her mother about her activities outside the home and at times had to defend her activities. Petrik recognized this defense. After her daughter Grace wrote a letter to her grandmother indicating her displeasure at her mother’s absences from home, Elizabeth defended her actions to her mother. Petrik quotes from a letter
Elizabeth wrote on September 23, 1890, “I do not feel that I have ever neglected home or home duties for any outside work or pleasure. I cannot live wholly within that narrow circle nor do I think it any woman’s duty to do so” (90). In defense of her political activist role Elizabeth told her mother that her traditional duties within the home are fulfilled first before she did any “outside work or pleasure.” In this entry we see Elizabeth’s strong opinion that to truly live, women should be able to go outside their “domestic sphere.”

In the introduction of the book Between Ourselves: Letters Between Mothers & Daughters (1983) Karen Payne states that from her compilation of mother-daughter letters from 1750 to 1982, “I discovered that, when women challenge tradition, they do often feel that they must justify their actions, above all to their mothers” (Payne vixi). Elizabeth illustrated this defense of her actions when she said, “Do not think I neglect home. The stockings are darned and the buttons sewed on and everything well-cared for” (Fisk, 2-11-1887). In this entry we see that as Elizabeth communicated her image of political activist she recognized that perhaps her mother believed that this role was secondary to her primary role as homemaker. She defended her actions by indicating her traditional duties had been completed with the phrase “everything well-cared for.”

In summary, Elizabeth’s political activities took her outside the traditional role of the proper nineteenth-century woman. She did not remain within her domestic sphere to address moral issues, but rather worked outside of it. She discussed the current politicians of the day and attended political rallies. Her work with the Poor Committee provided much needed support to Helena’s poor and destitute. Her social work expanded to specific concerns regarding women. She was an advocate for the women and young
girls of Montana. She took action to preserve the nineteenth-century value of purity by protecting these young girls both physically with a safe home and legally with legislative action. Through this activity we see that Elizabeth Chester Fisk did not remain wholly within her “domestic sphere,” but rather challenged a woman’s permanent place within it. Her strong defense of her outside activities illustrated that she recognized others did not share her views and that she was steadfast in her convictions. Elizabeth recognized that she could not “live wholly within that narrow circle” and she took action to remove herself from its confining nature.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Summary

The letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk were numerous and expressive. She spoke frankly to her mother about her experiences, desires, fears, and beliefs as a woman living in Helena, Montana, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Jameson refers to this type of written communication as "conversational talk" (148). The conversations Elizabeth Fisk had with her mother were intimate, uncensored and informal. It is this type of writing which Jameson compares to oral interviews and refers to as "oral talk."

The "oral talk" which Elizabeth used to speak to her mother communicated the many facets of her identity. Specifically, five major themes emerged from this talk: (a) Portraying a Fashionable Woman, (b) Presenting an Educated, Religious and Morally Superior Woman, (c) Managing the Family Home Well, (d) Trying to be a Good Mother, and (e) Becoming Politically Astute and Involved in Social Causes.

These five themes and their sub-themes combined to communicate Elizabeth’s presentment of self to her mother. This presentment showed a woman who sought to meet the definition of a white nineteenth-century woman and who faced challenges in doing so. In these letters we see the many roles Elizabeth played—homemaker, mother, and political activist. In carrying out these roles she faced challenges in meeting the expectations of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. In this private talk the social realities of life on the western frontier were communicated to her mother thousands of miles away. These images, along with those of other women, served to create the collective vision of life on the western frontier.
The image Elizabeth communicated was one of a middle-class woman. Her husband had a prominent position as the editor of the local paper. She was exposed to politics and the current events of the day through her husband’s position. She had the financial capability to hire domestic help to assist her in the maintenance of her home. She did not face the extreme hardships that women on the western prairies did; yet she faced her own perceived challenges. She attempted to create and re-create for her mother the image of a daughter who was trying to hold onto the beliefs and values instilled in her by her own “estimable mother” (Fisk, 12-15-1867) while facing the challenges present in this alien land.

She communicated to her mother the image of a western daughter that her mother could be proud of—one who worked hard to keep her children looking good while instilling within their hearts and minds the correct morals and values to keep them out of harm’s way once they left the sanctuary of the home. This was difficult to do however, with poor teachers and the temptations of society. She created for her mother the vision of a clean, warm home with a china set and piano—a home probably not much different from her mother’s. Her role as manager of the family home was challenged by the lack of acceptable domestic help. She showed her mother the social issues women faced collectively on the frontier through her political activism and the solutions she sought. This activity however placed her outside the traditional domestic role. Elizabeth worked hard at creating the images she wanted for her mother. In creating these images she challenged the nineteenth century’s definition of womanhood. Petrik recognized this tension when she wrote, “For Elizabeth, ‘whole-souled’ womanhood had become an ideological relic...” (95). The frontier had changed Elizabeth.
The idealized vision of a “proper” woman of the nineteenth century which Elizabeth was suppose to represent was just that—an ideal. The “real” image of a nineteenth-century woman was not found in the fictional literature of the era, but in the words of Elizabeth Chester Fisk.

Limitations

This study was limited, due to time constraints, to a sampling of the letters of Elizabeth Fisk and did not represent the entire collection of outgoing correspondence from Elizabeth to her mother. An analysis of the entire collection may have identified some additional themes, sub-themes or additional support of the themes. For instance, Paula Petrik’s in-depth research on Elizabeth’s political activist role provides additional information on Elizabeth’s membership in the Women’s Helena for the Capital Club (Petrik 91).

The sampling also did not include any incoming correspondence from Elizabeth’s mother. An analysis of incoming correspondence could confirm or deny the images I assert Elizabeth portrayed to her mother through her mother’s response to Elizabeth’s letters. The responses from her mother could confirm or deny her mother’s acceptance of these images. Analysis of additional letters may have shown that Elizabeth’s defense of her political activist role was initiated by correspondence from her mother in addition to her daughter Grace’s correspondence.

Future Research

This study has many implications for future research. With a larger sampling of the text, future researchers might identify additional themes regarding Elizabeth’s presentment of self. A study could be undertaken that would focus on one of the themes
identified for a more in-depth investigation. Additional research into mother-daughter communication of the era could expose differences or similarities with this study. Contemporary mother-daughter communication could also be contrasted with the results of this study. In addition to mother-daughter communication, father-son communication could be investigated and contrasted with this study.
APPENDIX A

1. Sewing/Clothing
2. Religion/Church
3. Home/Housecleaning
4. Elizabeth Busy/Working Hard/Tired
5. Domestic Help
6. Social Work/Civilizing
7. Suffering/Death
8. Gambling/Drinking
9. Motherhood/Raising Children
10. Children Kept Busy
11. Children’s Education
12. Politics
13. Nature/Outdoors
14. Sickness/Health
15. Social Calls
16. Streets of Helena
17. Gardening
18. Culture/Music/Theatre
19. Friendship
20. Food/Fish/Wild Game
21. Holiday Celebrations
22. Pregnant/Having more Children
23. Indians
24. Helena Herald/Newspapers
25. Homesick/Lonely
26. Rob Leaving/Traveling on Business
27. Reading/Books
28. Mail Delivery/Non-Delivery
29. Weather
30. Social Events/Fair
31. Fisk Mine
32. Fire
33. Railroad
34. Ft. Benton
35. Traveling
36. Mother’s Health
37. Father’s Death/Estate
38. Dell
39. Uncle Van/Miss Beach/Cousin De
40. Col. Dodge
41. Cardinal Gibbon
42. Dr. Bullard
43. Sarah
44. General’s Terry and Brooke
45. William
46. Mae
47. Mr. Witlach
48. Uncle Jack
49. Aunt Mary and Uncle John
50. Neighbors
51. Misc. People
52. Grace
53. Clarke
54. Robbie
55. Florence and Jamie
56. Asa
57. Mother Save my letters
### APPENDIX B

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APPENDIX C

Portraying a Fashionable Woman

Presenting an Educated, Religious, and Morally Superior Woman
- Attempting to Maintain her Religious Beliefs
- Expressing her Religious Beliefs
- Preaching About the Vices of Drinking and Dancing
- Expanding her Literary Horizons

Managing the Family Home Well
- Sharing the Family Home
- Maintaining a Clean, Warm Home
- Challenges and Successes with Domestic Help
- Furnishing an Elegant Home
- Creating a Beautiful Exterior

Trying to be a Good Mother
- Values and Beliefs on Childrearing
- Educating Children on the Frontier
- Instilling Good Morals in Children
- Creating Fashionable Clothing for Children

Becoming Politically Astute and Involved with Social Issues
- Discussing Politicians
- Attempting to Relieve the Sufferings of the Poor
- Becoming Active in Women’s Causes
- Defending Her Outside Activities
WORKS CITED


Fisk Family Papers, Ms. 31. Outgoing Correspondence from Elizabeth Fisk to Mrs. Azuba Chester. Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana.


