family story lies at the heart of American western history. Through the oft-told tales of western conquest and resistance, settlement and development, wind subtle, insistent themes of family, kinship, and community. Consider, for example, one extraordinarily evocative scene from My Darling Clementine, John Ford’s classic 1946 western film starring Henry Fonda as Wyatt Earp. Silhouetted against the bright southwestern sky rises the skeletal frame of a church tower, a cross at its peak, a joyous bell pealing from its topmost rafters. A lowering mesa broods in the background, nature dwarfing the raw town at its base. In the foreground, two American flags whip bravely in the brisk wind. Men, women, and children, all dressed in their Sunday best, crowd onto the plank floor of the unfinished meetinghouse. And in their midst, knees awkwardly lifted in cautious celebration of the new church, dances the town's tough, gunfighting, poker-playing marshal, tarned by the genteel Bostonian whom he holds gingerly in his arms.

Ford’s haunting imagery encapsulates one of the primal themes in the history and mythology of the nineteenth-century American West. Time and again, in memoirs and novels, folk songs and films, political speeches and academic histories, Americans have insisted that the story of western settlement is a story of the conquest of nature and the taming of human nature in the name of the family and of the community that families together form. In this familiar saga, the trajectory from savagery to civilization both defines and legitimizes the westward expansion of the American people, and the essence of American civilization lies in its institutions of family and community life. The western drama may seem to be a violent, masculine one, its main protagonists almost exclusively male. Mountain men and miners, cowboys and speculators, native warriors and the U.S. Cavalry, all crowd onto center stage. But sooner or later even the most relentlessly masculine conquest narrative yields to the developmental logic of domestication, and the spotlight shifts to those other archetypal figures who have been waiting in the wings—families trekking westward in covered wagons, wives working alongside husbands to erect a log cabin, warriors setting their hands to the plow, children trudging to a one-room schoolhouse, a community building a church. In popular perception and scholarly interpretation alike, the final integration of the western saga into the nation’s ongoing history always seems to turn on those pregnant moments when family and community finally take root, just as Ford’s turbulent film pivots on the gentle scene at the church dance.
Thus when Ford’s boomtown marshal, the fictionalized Wyatt Earp, symbolically embraces the communal and familial values represented by the newly formed Tombstone congregation and by Clementine, the lady from Boston, his feud with the vicious Clantons becomes a crusade for civilization and his success at the O.K. Corral a bittersweet victory that brings to an end the only way of life in which he, with his shooter’s skills, could flourish. Ford establishes the essential savagery of both nature and man at the opening of the film with stark camera shots of a pair of menacing gunmen who observe cattle and cowboys in a parched desert setting. But at the end of the film it is a woman, Clementine, the town’s new schoolteacher, standing by a tamed, fenced-in landscape, who takes the observer’s role as the shooters depart.

The three Earps, seeking to avenge their murdered youngest brother, initially encounter a darkly lit Tombstone of saloons, dance halls, and poker games, a world where Shakespearean tragedians can only degenerate into farce. “Wide-awake, wide-open town, Tombstone! You can get anything you want there.” Its denizens are rowdy miners and cowboys, gamblers and whores, its boss a consumptive, alcoholic physician who has turned his back on the civilization of the East. Clementine, his former fiancée, proves unable to reclaim Doc Holliday for Boston and all it stands for. But she begins the taming of Wyatt Earp, and as he primped for her in the local barbershop, Ford lets us glimpse for the first time a different, brighter Tombstone. Beyond the dark of the hotel porch the street floods with sunshine. Wagons and buggies purposefully stream past, families greet one another on the sidewalk, and serving girls in their best hats bustle out of the hotel. “If I wasn’t in the territory,” Virgil Earp observes, “I’d swear we were back home on a Sunday morning.” But the Sabbath has indeed come to the territory. “You know,” says Morgan Earp, “there’s probably a lot of nice people around here. We just ain’t met ’em.” Then Wyatt accepts Clementine’s ladylike challenge to escort her to church; he slowly leaves the shadows to step with her out into the Sabbath sun. Thus when the Earps subsequently destroy the Clantons at the O.K. Corral, they not only have avenged their brother; they have also, as Wyatt promised, left behind a country where young kids like him “will be able to grow up and live safe,” where law and culture are free from ridicule, where the schoolteacher literally replaces the gunslinger. Female sexuality yields to feminine sensibility, and the madam shows herself to be a sensitive nurse. Even Doc Holliday, although too corrupted to be allowed to survive into the new era, is redeemed in death by his belated decision to join Wyatt’s crusade.

At the heart of the western saga, Ford would appear to be telling us, lies the civilizing process. The Wild West is an individualistic, solipsistic male world untrammeled by law, morality, higher culture, or feminine domesticity. Its women are deceiving whores and half-breeds, fully deserving the symbolic cleansing in the horse trough that Wyatt administers to Chihuahua, Doc’s paramour. Domesticity is as doomed as young James Earp and his plans to marry his sweetheart. “Mac, you ever been in love?” Wyatt asks one of Doc’s employees. “No,” he replies, “I been a bartender all me life.” Women, the family, and the bonds of community can thrive, it seems, only when the West has been tamed. They are the motive that invests the history of western violence with virtue, just as their ultimate triumph signals the end of the uniquely western experience and the final integration of the frontier into the ongoing history of the settled, civilized nation. And
in the process they are themselves changed, strengthened, made more robust. A formerly dependent woman like Clementine can now stand alone and shape a role for herself in constructing the new community; the community, like the deacon’s womenfolk, can reject the artificial conventions of the East for the wholesome naturalness of western life. Family and community, fresh and reinvigorated, are the rewards that lie at the end of the trail, the ends but not the means of western conquest.

Or are they? Ford’s story on one level is indeed the familiar parable of family, community, and the civilizing process that has provided so much of western legend and history with its standard plot. But on another level it charts what can be understood only as a far more complex transformation from one regime of family and community to another. The Clantons, after all, are in Ford’s telling also a family of a kind, a dynasty of four brothers held together by their father’s will and whip, and the Earps are yet another set of apparently motherless sons, bound in duty and affection to the family economy headed by their Pa back in California. Powerful motives of family honor and vengeance fuel the actions of both clans. Not even Doc Holliday has fully shaken off the claims of family and community. Rather, he is a renegade who prolongs his exile to avoid bringing shame to those who claim him as their own, and in his resistance to the new regime that Clementine represents he even contemplates making his liaison with Chihuahua a permanent one.

Nor is Ford’s raucous Tombstone without its own communal structures. It has a mayor and a marshal and the forms of law; when Wyatt Earp marches to the O.K. Corral, he does so with an arrest warrant in his pocket and with the blessings of both the mayor and the deacon of the new church. Untamed Tombstone can constitute itself a moral community in quest of common goals, whether simple entertainment or support for a wounded singer. And it is linked to the wider national community by everything from accounts in the Lordsburg bank to newfangled barber chairs imported from Kansas City. It may not share the moral code of the domesticated, cultured East, but it has its own communal morality nonetheless, a masculine morality that proscribes equally stealing cattle, playing eight-handed poker games, cheating on one’s lover, and drawing on a man who is not carrying a gun. Ford’s ambivalence about the passing of this order may not be as palpable here as in a later film like The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), with its overt acknowledgment of the falsity of the myths upon which the civilizing process rested. But when Wyatt Earp rides away from Tombstone and its new teacher, it is not just Clementine who is “lost and gone forever” to him. In remaining true to the dictates of one kind of family and community, he has midwifed another, different familial, communal order in which a man like himself can find no place. It is not so much that family and community triumph as that one kind of family order replaces another.

Ford’s story, of course, bears only a tenuous relationship to historical reality. It is rather difficult to turn the actual saga of the Earps, the Clantons, Doc Holliday, and the O.K. Corral into a comparable drama of domestication, no matter how ambiguous. The historical Earps were hardly the virtuous retired lawmen and cowboys of Ford’s fable. The best recent accounts make it clear that the Earps, though probably not the stage robbers and horse thieves of the revisionist counterlegend, were definitely gamblers, bartenders, brothel keepers, and small-time speculators, as well as sometime lawmen
and farmers. The famous shoot-out—not at, but near, the O.K. Corral—had less to do with family vengeance than with tensions arising from economic and political rivalry. And rather than nobly sacrificing his life, Doc Holliday—a Georgian, not a Bostonian—probably initiated the slaughter by drawing first, and lived to trade on his notoriety. Tombstone indeed had a young, single schoolteacher, twenty-four-year-old Lucy McFarland who lived with her sister and her lawyer brother-in-law, but she was from West Virginia, not Boston, and it was not she but the undoubtedly less virtuous Josephine Sarah Marcus, an "artiste" raised in a prosperous German Jewish mercantile family of San Francisco, who attracted Wyatt Earp’s wandering eye.

Nevertheless, like their filmic counterparts, the real Earps inhabited a West defined by distinctive bonds of family and community. They were the offspring of an agrarian Kentucky clan who migrated westward as a family in chainwise fashion, first to Illinois and Iowa, then to Missouri, Kansas, and California, as the various brothers peeled off on a series of continually intersecting trajectories that carried them singly or together through mining camps, railheads, and cow towns from Montana to Kansas and Texas before reuniting them all in 1880 in the new Arizona boomtown of Tombstone. They were, in fact, all married men. Each arrived in Tombstone with his wife, common-law or otherwise, firmly in tow, though Wyatt would replace his partner with Josie during his Tombstone stay. Their women labored for them and moved with them. The Earp brothers were on occasion founding members of church congregations and candidates for public office. They supported and leaned on one another in their efforts for economic advancement, and outside the O.K. Corral they joined to affirm their reputations against not one but two pairs of brothers—McLaury as well as Clantons—who like them were striving to make it family-fashion in the West. The Clantons, like the Earps, were members of a southern clan seeking to reproduce a familiar pastoral lifestyle in the new territory. The McLauryys, by contrast, were young New York-born, Iowa-raised entrepreneurs who cut loose from their parents to find the fortune that would enable them to found new families of their own. Doc Holliday’s initial move west can be seen as a similar attempt by the professional son of well-to-do urban, middle-class parents to establish a home for himself in a healthier climate. The real Tombstone, like its movie version, was overwhelmingly a community of unattached miners leavened by a sprinkling of families like these, to be found mainly within the town’s small entrepreneurial class. But the surrounding countryside was punctuated with smaller, family-centered communities—one of them Mormon, several Mexican—that testified to the area’s older, deeper domestic roots. And although the only Native American in Ford’s film was the drunkard whose literal removal signaled the beginning of Wyatt Earp’s crusade to civilize Tombstone, the constant threat of Apache attack was a disturbing reminder to the historical Tombstone of yet another familial tradition in the region.

**Thinking about the Family in the American West**

In fact as in film, it would seem, the American West was not a domestic tabula rasa. As Ford intuitively sensed, there is indeed a family story at the core of America’s western history, but it is something other and more complicated than our familiar fable of
domestication and civilization. Many different kinds of family arrangements were to be found in nineteenth-century America's successive Wests, before, during, and after their incorporation into the American nation. Kinship ties could extend across great distances, and family logic could influence even seemingly unattached men and women. Families performed a range of different functions, for their members and for the broader society, that varied with time and place, culture and class. The family in any society is necessarily a cultural and legal construct that invests the basic biological relationship of parents and children with social meaning. Societies determine for themselves what defines a family, who constitutes its members and what their responsibilities are to one another, how far the family identity extends through marriage and consanguinity and across generations, on what basis a family is to be formed, and what societal functions it is meant to fulfill. Tombstone in 1880, no less than Texas in 1820 or Iowa in 1850, was a family frontier in the most literal sense: an arena in which culturally variant constructs of the family, carried by individuals pursuing varying family strategies, met, intermingled, and clashed. These frontier family dynamics played a crucial role in shaping the new societies that emerged, and in turn the struggle to define these new societies helped define the range of regional family models that would survive, the directions in which they would evolve, and their broader influence on American family construction.

Though scholars long neglected the contours and implications of this family frontier, to nineteenth-century Americans the link between western lands and the family was a self-evident though complicated one. "It is in the very philosophy of things, in a country like ours, whose free institutions awaken and bear up the spirit of aspiration from a humble hut, as well as the lofty palace, that the poor man, surrounded by his wife and his children, and animated by a holy love of those endear'd objects, with a pure conscience and a resolved purpose, relying upon his own unassisted arm, should go forth to the wilds of the far West to improve his fortunes, and confirm his personal independence," enthused one senator in 1841. To provide for their children, families moved west. In moving west, they escaped the corrupting influences that nineteenth-century American thought attributed to urban life, thereby preserving for the nation its body of independent, freedom-loving householders and, not coincidently, preserving the West for the nation. As an 1846 observer noted, "All we had to do was to let our women and children go [to the Oregon region] and, without assistance from any one, they would take possession of the country."

Thus easy access by settlers to public land was defended in terms of both its benefits to families and their benefits to the nation. "I know the character of the pioneer," insisted a territorial delegate to Congress in 1852, "and of the men who even now are on their way to the West, and I speak understandingly when I say that it is in such homes as this bill, if adopted, will create, which will forever remain the nurseries of that love of freedom by which alone our present happy form of government can be perpetuated." But by the same token the West could endanger the American family, should it lure away too many of its children or should the family in the West become too isolated from uplifting moral influences, too exposed to the risks of excessive speculative gain. The nation needed strong families; strong families required the independence that western
lands could give them; family settlement was the best and cheapest insurance that the West would be tied firmly to the national culture; but familiar models of the family might also prove vulnerable in the West.

Nowhere was the complex circular interplay of family and western opportunity in nineteenth-century American thought better explained than by that acute analyst of Jacksonian America, Alexis de Tocqueville. Without a law of primogeniture, Tocqueville insisted, American families had developed few strong attachments to place or patrimonial land. The resources of the West preserved the promise of economic progress and equality for each new generation on which the belief in American democracy rested, while encouraging the family to reshape itself in democracy's mold. Patriarchy waned, relations of dominance between father and son, and brother and brother, yielded to companionable cooperation, and women, in Tocqueville's reading, achieved and accepted an equal though separate status. Such democratic families raised children appropriately prepared to leave home to make their fortunes; at the same time, these families became a central reason for the stability of American democracy. Order and community in a society lacking strong central authority depended not only on the intersecting self-interests of its self-governing citizens but also on shared mores inculcated by religion and cultivated within the family. But this meant that if the West was the source of the American family's strength, it could also become the nation's weakness, should the bonds of family become too distended in the course of settlement. High levels of speculative profit in the West, Tocqueville feared, too often attracted westwardly mobile men unhampered by kith and kin and thus undisciplined by morality or public opinion. Western opportunity shaped the domesticity on which American democracy depended, but opportunity also placed the family in peril.

American artists in the middle decades of the nineteenth century similarly constructed for their viewers a domestic West, a West peopled by families, a nurturing West for the homes that would cradle the nation's future. The archetypal images were the Madonna-like women whom a stalwart Daniel Boone leads through the Cumberland Gap in George Caleb Bingham's 1851 painting, the three-generational family alongside its covered wagon that listens to a rugged trapper in William Ranney's 1853 Advice on the Prairie, and most especially the log cabin domesticity depicted in Thomas Cole's 1845 The Hunter's Return (see p. 145). Cole's cozy vine-trellised cabin nestles beneath sublime mountain scenery. A broom and a washtub flank its door, laundry dries beside neat rows of cabbages in the garden, one dog sniffs at the dinner meat airing on a bench and another playfully nuzzles a small child, while smoke drifts invitingly from the cabin's stone chimney and two women eagerly hail their menfolk returning laden from the hunt. No matter that these were in good part images explicitly crafted to celebrate and encourage American expansionism. They worked because they spoke to mid-century Americans' perception of the West as a family resource, the same perception that buttressed antebellum demands for a liberalized homestead law and fueled the attack on slavery in the territories as a threat to family settlement. When the West was portrayed as violent and dangerous, as it often was in paintings of Indian attack, abduction, and rape, it was the threat to the domesticity of the settlers' West that was particularly emphasized, the threat to the purity of its women and the sanctity of its homes. But even the ostensibly untrammeled West of the Native Americans and the fur trappers who
lived among them was often domesticated by the artists of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, who produced a compelling iconography of Indian daily life and trapper-Indian family unions.

But by the eve of the Civil War, a more somber reassessment was beginning to inform the log cabins that Jasper Cropsey and Sanford Robinson Gifford depicted as inappropriate and unlovely intrusions in the natural landscape, and soon a different kind of artist’s West began to take center stage. Families still moved west, their journey now hastened by the railroad, in the popular lithographs of Currier and Ives, but increasingly in western art the domestic middle landscape faded before, on the one hand, a masculine West of soldiers, Indian warriors, and cowboys—Frederic Remington, Charles Schreyvogel, and Charles Russell country—and, on the other, the tourist’s delight of unpeopled vistas and valleys, as cultivated by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. The semiarid lands and boom-and-bust mining camps and cow towns of the post—Civil War West were chancy environments in which to seek family security. The new suburbs of the burgeoning cities back East seemed to offer a safer domestic haven, and in art as in literature a wilder West now shaped the public perception.

It is no accident that it was in the context of this dominant new masculinized and nature-bound western vision that Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 fashioned his lyric argument for the significance of the West in the nation’s development. For the earlier generation of Tocqueville, mores—culture—had taken precedence over environment, and the centrality of the western family seemed self-evident. But by Turner’s time, many American reformers had come to doubt the ability of the family to withstand the pressures of the new urban environment. What role, then, could such a feeble institution hope to play in the face of the even greater savagery of the wild? It is little wonder that

In William Ramny’s painting, the men of the family listen intently to an old trapper’s tales and absorb the historical lore of the plains, while the Madonna-like mother and child engage the viewer more directly and affirm the family strategies that motivated western settlement.

consideration of the family was overwhelmed in Turner's analysis by his emphasis on the competitive individualism of the frontier and that his stage theory of frontier settlement could readily be taken to imply that families culminated rather than coordinated the process. It was left to others, most notably Arthur W. Calhoun in his pioneering 1917 history of the American family, to work out the more specific implications of Turnerian thinking for the relationship between the family and the West. Calhoun noted that the pioneer's necessary focus on "home building and home protection" meant that "the psychology of domesticity was supreme," that a strong "clan-spirit" often developed, and that "the family was the one substantial social institution" on the frontier. But he did not explore the structuring role played by the family in the West, a role that these insights implied. Instead, he focused on the effects of the West on the family, and here his Turnerianism emerged most clearly. The most important formative influence on the American family in the decades after the Revolution, he insisted, was "pioneering and the frontier." Frontier dispersion, hardship, and democracy combined to foster early marriage, high fecundity, easy divorce, the emancipation of children, improved status for women, and insensitivity to the claims of lineage. The frontier, in short, encouraged
a fundamental transformation from a regime of "familism" to the "parentalism" that he saw dominating his own era.

By the time that historians began to develop a systematic interest in family history in the 1960s, however, Turnervian approaches were so thoroughly discredited that the question of a specific western or frontier influence on the American family was barely raised. Family historians uncovered a rich and finely textured account of the fundamental transformation of American family patterns and ideology in the course of industrialization, urbanization, national centralization, political change, and ethnic and racial pluralism but made little effort to incorporate geographical expansion and western regional development into their central interpretation. Only as western historians belatedly began to explore the role of women—and children—in the West did family-related issues again receive much scholarly attention. We can now draw on a diverse and growing body of research to sketch, in broad outlines, answers to the four basic questions that structure this essay. How did family auspices influence the processes of migration, settlement, resistance, and integration that peopled the West? What were the resulting variations in western family patterns? Can we identify a distinctive western influence on the development of the American family? And how did the particular values of nineteenth-century American family life shape western regional development?

Family and community were not a simple culmination of western conquest. Nor did new kinds of conditions create a new breed of family or community in the American West. As European and African Americans in the course of the nineteenth century pushed westward over the Appalachians, through the great valley of the Mississippi, across the plains and the Rockies and the deserts to the Pacific and back into the intermountain plateaus and parks, and as Asians moved eastward and Mexicans north, they all carried with them familiar and diverse assumptions about domestic life and firmly established patterns of domestic structures, functions, and relationships. They encountered similarly deep-seated domestic patterns among the Native Americans and French, Spanish, and mixed-descent colonists already inhabiting the land. Bonds of family and community fundamentally shaped the processes of both conquest and resistance, and those processes in turn molded the domestic landscapes that westerners would inhabit by the end of the century. There would be not one form of the western family, one kind of western community, but many. Changing American family and community norms, selective migration, local resource variation, differential incorporation of indigenous peoples, and locally varying degrees of economic integration with the national order all combined to construct a complex and continually evolving domestic landscape in the American West that affected every aspect of western life and influenced evolving conceptions of the American family. Family threads were woven deeply into the fabric of western development from the outset, and western history cannot fully be understood without tracing the patterns they formed. The O.K. Corral showdown was "strictly a family affair," insisted John Ford's Wyatt Earp. The same, we shall see, might almost be said of the West itself.

The Family Logics of Western Settlement
When young Millard Fillmore moved west to Buffalo in 1822, he was both following and breaking a family tradition: following, because he was repeating a pattern set by his
father and his grandfather before him; breaking, because whereas they had sought new land on the frontier, it was the new opportunity of a western city that drew the young lawyer who later would become the nation’s thirteenth president. Westward migration was certainly an established family habit. In 1765 Millard’s grandfather, after seeing his two older brothers move to new settlement areas in Nova Scotia and northwestern Connecticut respectively, set out for frontier Vermont, leaving his youngest brother behind to farm the family land in Norwich, Connecticut. As his sons came of age, they repeated their father’s pattern. The two youngest remained behind to take over the Vermont homestead while the oldest moved with his young family to Oneida County, New York, and then on to the Buffalo area as his children approached adulthood.

Then the second and third sons—the second was Millard’s father—in their turn joined forces to purchase wild land in Cayuga County, New York. But luck turned against them. Their title proved defective, and they were forced to lease poor land elsewhere in the county. Disgusted with farming under such circumstances, Millard’s father, as Millard later recalled, became “anxious that his sons should follow some other occupation” and schemed to apprentice them to such standard rural trades as carding and cloth finishing, carpentry, and masonry. But he soon realized that his talented oldest son could set his sights still higher. Born with the century, in a primitive log cabin, Millard came of age as the pace of local life was quickening in upstate New York. Lending libraries and academies were bringing the culture of a wider world into the backwoods, and Millard ardently scrapped together a sort of education for himself in the time he could steal from farmwork, apprenticeship, and winter schoolteaching. So Fillmore senior finally approached his landlord, a wealthy judge, to beg—successfully—that he give young Millard a chance to read law. When Millard was ready to move on a couple years later, it was Buffalo, portal to the vast western wilderness about to be opened by the Erie Canal, that inevitably attracted—and amply rewarded—his ambitions. Two of his younger brothers would attempt to follow the same path (both died young), and two of his Buffalo-area cousins became local ministers. But the rest of this generation of Fillmores continued to trod the accustomed family paths. One of the Buffalo cousins stayed behind on his father’s land while the remaining cousin, and Millard’s three other brothers and their families, followed the Great Lakes westward to the new frontier farmlands of northern Indiana, Michigan, and later Minnesota.

Few families produce a future president, distinguished or otherwise. But in other respects the Fillmores typified a fundamental family process that peopled much of the American West. Westward migration for them, as for so many rural American families, was a generationally recurring event, as expected and regular a stage in the normal life course as marriage or retirement. It formed a central element in the family’s strategy for providing livelihoods for the coming generation; family considerations governed the timing and composition of migration, and extended family groups sought common destinations. Individualistic loners were probably more common in western legend than in life. No matter how tenuous family ties might seem when a young scapegrace like Millard’s cousin Henry Glezen Fillmore drifted into the free and easy life of the Indian trader on Minnesota’s northern frontier in the late 1840s, it was no accident that brothers and cousins soon followed in his wake. And when he subsequently married, it
As the three generations depicted in this 1854 field sketch of western immigrants suggest, extended families often moved together, preserving a labor force that might be essential in developing a new home.


was a young woman with a similarly extensive local family connection of her own. The story of the family in the West necessarily begins with its varied influences on the peopling of the region itself.

It often seemed to nineteenth-century Americans that there was something inexplicable, even irrational, about the pace and intensity of westward migration. They referred to it in terms suggestive of irresistible natural phenomena. They spoke of "Oregon fever" breaking out, of migrants "swarming" like a hive of bees, of stampedes and epidemics, waves and floods. For the Cleveland Herald in 1839, migration was a "tide" that in "the past season [had] been setting toward the west stronger than ever." Americans seemed a breed of restless wanderers, ever seeking elbow room or speculative profits over the next horizon. What but irrational, individualistic ambition or the equivalent of a force of nature could pull so many away from well-tended domestic hearths and the ample opportunities to be found in the more developed sectors of the nation's economy?

Scholars have tended to seek more rational explanations in "push factors" peculiar to a particular time and place—the worn-out fields of New England that by the 1830s could no longer compete with the productivity of new western lands, for example, or the fevers, floods, and low crop prices with which Missourians had to contend in the 1840s—or in uprooting personal crises like bankruptcy or family tragedy. Or they have stressed the "pull" of western opportunity for a striving, entrepreneurial nation—the special "one time only" profits that could accrue to those who reaped the first crops from virgin soil, to those who pastured the first cattle on prairie grasses, trapped the first beaver, mined the first ores. But there were always crises somewhere, and migration was not the only possible response; western opportunity always beckoned, but only some Americans responded. Underlying the complex interactions of specific push and pull
factors that help account for the peopling of any given frontier was a family regime that made westward migration for countless American families like the Fillmores—and the Earps—a viable, sometimes even an inevitable, option.

The family, Brazil's noted anthropologist Gilberto Freyre asserted several decades ago, was, for his country, "the great colonizing factor." The same can be said for the United States. The successive Wests that were integrated into the American nation in the course of the nineteenth century were shaped from the outset by the needs and strategies of American families. A number of different and changing family cultures coexisted in the older settled areas of the United States—and in Europe, China, and Mexico—during the nineteenth century. Their varying assumptions about family function, size, and relationships fundamentally influenced who chose to migrate to new frontier areas, when, and with what goals. The varying family patterns of the native peoples already resident in these areas were similarly influential in shaping their ability to resist, adapt, or succumb to the newcomers. Equally significant was the ideological colonization of the West by a powerful new familial ideal that, once embedded in institutions and law, proved able to play an independent role in the shaping of western life.

It was the family cultures of the westward-migrating European-American populations that would be the dominant vectors of change in the new region. Historians have identified the nineteenth century as a time of fundamental transformation in American family life, when a family regime suitable for life in a traditional agrarian society yielded to a new kind of family better adapted to the new industrial order. Various labels have been proposed to capture this transformation—from the "traditional" to the "modern," from the "patriarchal" to the "companionate," from the "instrumental" to the "affective," from the "household" to the "domestic" family—with many recognizing in the nineteenth-century "Victorian" family a style distinctive both from what came before and from the regime that would become dominant in the twentieth century. Whatever the terminology, a new set of assumptions about family life came to be widely shared among nineteenth-century Americans: that the ideal family rested on an affectionate union of a man and a woman who provided one another with love, companionship, and comfort and who carefully and lovingly nurtured their children to be well-developed individuals and productive members of society. Each parent had a separate, distinctive sphere within this family ideal: the man was to be its head, its public representative, its wage earner, and its ultimate source of authority; the woman, its heart and its conscience, kept the home, trained the children, and deferred to the husband while providing gentle moral counsel. No longer a basic unit of production, this new family ideal offered its members a private, sentimental retreat from the rigors of the new, vigorously competitive, capitalist economy. This new style began appearing in prescriptive popular literature discussing family life by the 1810s, and within a generation it overwhelmed the previous emphasis on large, patriarchally governed and productive families with well-defined public roles.

But too much emphasis on the ideal family model defined by the ideology of the times ignores the actual variety of family styles within the nineteenth-century American family regime, and a periodization based on the replacement of one family ideal by another obscures the extent to which older family styles continued to coexist with newer.
If we abandon familiar efforts to classify family styles on the basis of the emotive character of familial relationships or the source of power within the family and turn instead to the economic basis of family organization, we can identify at a very general level four distinctive, coexisting nineteenth-century American family styles that shaped the westward migration process. We can term these the patrimonial, the proletarian, the entrepreneurial, and the slave family styles. Each style had its own distinctive logic of migration.

To understand those logics, we have to recall in very general terms how these styles evolved. American families of all stripes were heirs to what has been termed the western European family system. Any traditional people, dependent on relatively unproductive agriculture, limited craft production, and inefficient trade, necessarily faces the classic Malthusian dilemma of balancing resources and population. With population multiplying over successive generations, land and hence food will run short, resulting, if nature is left to run its course, in famine, disease, and war until the population is again reduced to a level that can be supported by available resources. Of course, nature does not have to be left to run its course, and in traditional western Europe, the most important regulator proved to be the cultural assumption that procreation should occur only within marriage and that marriage should occur only when the new couple were capable of supporting their own household. This meant that the proportions of the population who married, the age at marriage, and consequently the number of children produced by the marriage even in the absence of effective contraception could vary greatly with time, place, and class, depending on the productivity of the local economy and a particular family’s place within it. When times were hard, marriages were postponed, birthrates declined, and family size grew smaller. High death rates, particularly among children, also kept family size in bounds. The average western European age at marriage, consequently, tended to be relatively high. The average family was never large, nor were extended multigenerational families residing in the same household very common.

Central to the survival of such a traditional family was the patrimony on which it depended—the land or craft from which it earned its living and which it transmitted from generation to generation. The family passed through a recurrent cycle, from when a young couple married and took over its patrimony, to the maximum earning years when children worked alongside their parents to amass the resources needed for their start in life, to the point when the parents retired to make way for the next generation. In some European regions, the patrimony was divided among all children; in others it remained with one heir while the rest had to find other niches in society. But whatever the specific strategy, the basic principle remained: it was through the family that the individual gained access to a livelihood, and families thus depended on maintaining the patrimony from generation to generation to ensure the livings of their members. Because families were the fundamental units of local society, performing most of its basic functions of reproduction, production, education, welfare, and even governance, they had a fundamentally public character, and local society—formally through the agencies of government and religion, informally through gossip and social sanctions on behavior—paid close attention to the regulation of life within individual families. Wider kinship networks were also important assets. In an age when few institutions existed to
guarantee the behavior of strangers, shared blood was one of the best ways of securing trust, and kinship ties could be invoked to ensure everything from emergency assistance to business partnerships, making marriage as much an alliance of two kin networks and two patrimonies as of two people.

Family limitation through delayed marriage was not, of course, the only way that resources and population could be kept in balance. Over the long term, improved productivity released gradually increasing proportions of the western European population from agriculture, paving the way for the quickening of manufacture and trade that would usher in the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. In the process, two other family styles took shape. One was the proletarian family. Wage earners, urban or rural, lacking either rights in land or a trade that could be passed down to their children, had little reason to think of their families in cross-generational, patrimonial terms. For them, the family economy could be only a pooling of wages for mutual survival. There was little reason to postpone marriage, husband and wife shared the necessity of labor, and additional children were more often regarded in terms of the wages that they would earn rather than the drain on scarce resources that they might represent. Near the other end of the economic spectrum emerged what might best be termed the entrepreneurial family, a family style focused less on the preservation and transmission of the patrimony than on enterprising investment in the constantly changing opportunity offered by the emerging capitalist order. For those with the means to sustain it, the family ceased being the main unit of production. The husband followed his work out of the home into the male world of business, leaving his wife behind to cultivate domesticity, rear their children in the entrepreneurial virtues, and through her tasteful consumption, affirm the gentility of the striving family—in sum, the family ideal that would be propagated as the desired national norm in nineteenth-century America. These families remained enmeshed in the web of kinship and continued to enshrine the ideal of patriarchal authority, but the productive unit of husband, wife, and children—the core of the patrimonial family—was gone, and the number of children declined. Success in the new economy favored those endowed with familial gifts of education and capital but unhampered by constraining obligations to people or place; for such men on the make, the new domestic ideology served as a substitute tether to society's need for the support of women and children.

Accompanying these changes was yet another resolution to the Malthusian dilemma: migration. Even in traditional Europe, those who could not find a niche in rural society often sought opportunity in a nearby town or moved to new lands on the margins of European cultivation. From the early seventeenth century onward, they could also move to America. Their emigration was necessarily influenced by the family economies of which they were a part and which shaped their hopes for life in America. Thus the historian Bernard Bailyn has documented the presence of two very distinct migration streams in the heavy emigration from Britain to America in the mid-eighteenth century. One stream he terms "provincial," made up of mature families with growing children who moved from the agricultural areas of northern England and Scotland with the hope of reestablishing what we have called a patrimonial agrarian family economy on American land. The other "metropolitan" stream consisted mainly of young men, and
some young women, who moved as individuals from England's largest cities to seek laboring or entrepreneurial employment in the more urbanized areas of America in particular.

By the time of national independence, some version of the patrimonial family ordered life for the vast majority of Americans who lived in the new nation's rural areas—some 95 percent, according to the 1790 census—and for many in the few but growing cities. The rigorous logic of the proletarian family was, however, also spreading in the cities, and the entrepreneurial family style was beginning to flex its metaphorical wings. Equally in evidence was a fourth generalized family style, formed under conditions of slavery and hence dominant among the roughly 20 percent of the 1790 population who were of African descent. The slave family, as historians have described it in its mature form in the decades before the Civil War, generally centered on a stable two-parent household wherever possible. But parents had little control over either their own work or the fates of their children, and families were constantly at risk of disruption through sale and forced migration. Their situation encouraged general status equality between the sexes and embedded each nuclear family deeply in a broad local net of kin and community that could be called on for the support that the nuclear family was never able to ensure.

The vast expanses of land lying to the west, by European standards lightly used and often lightly defended, almost inevitably played a particularly prominent role in the American family calculus of survival and intergenerational succession. Why delay marriage, why limit children, why divide a patrimony, why cling to the old family hearth, when the limitless resources of the West seemed there for the taking? "To better their condition in an unknown land our forefathers left all that was dear in earthly objects," President Andrew Jackson declared in 1830. "Our children by thousands yearly leave the land of their birth to seek new homes in distant regions. Does Humanity weep at these painful separations from everything, animate and inanimate, with which the young heart has become entwined? Far from it. It is rather a source of joy that our country affords scope where our young population may range unconstrained in body or in mind, developing the power and faculties of man in their highest perfection." Future historians would note that the expenses of establishing a western home could be substantial, precluding this option for many, but European-American families would prove surprisingly capable of marshaling the resources needed for migration when it fit within the logic of their long-term strategies. And because that logic varied with family style, so too did the influence of family on the timing, composition, and goals of migration and hence also on the character of the new communities created in the West.

Two Families Move West
There may be no better way to illustrate this point than to take a closer look at two representative American families as they moved across the continent from 1700 to 1900. The Fillmores can serve as our New England example, whereas the Maxeys, who arrived in Virginia at about the same time as the first Fillmore set foot in New England, provide a southern counterpart, necessary because both slavery and kinship systems created distinctive regional differences. These two families were chosen almost at random from
among the plethora of families for whom well-researched genealogies have been published in recent decades. Despite gaps inevitable in even the best-researched record, the basic information about places and dates of birth, marriage, death, landownership, occupation, and the like compiled in Charles L. Fillmore’s and Edythe Maxey Clark’s authoritative family genealogies yields a surprisingly rich and consistent account of family migration strategies when set within the broader context provided by family and settlement history. Though the Maxey family, unlike the Fillmores, never produced a president, it did number among its members both the wife of Abraham Lincoln’s law partner and a Confederate general who later became a Texas senator. More important for present purposes, however, is the very anonymity of most of the more than 1,400 Maxeys and 650 Fillmores whose eight generations of westward migration illuminate the strategies that they shared with countless other European-American families of the time. Like most genealogies, these accounts permit us to follow only the male lines through extended generational sequences, but the daughters of each successive generation are included. It is also important to note that our generalized analysis necessarily skips over many intermediate family moves, side paths, and backtracks in the interests of interpretive economy.

Either Fillmores or Maxeys participated in virtually every stage of the European-American penetration of the successive Wests of the nineteenth century. Most of the Maxeys, like the Earps and the Clantons in Tombstone, formed part of that vast procession of upland southerners who trailed Daniel Boone across the upper South and lower Midwest to Missouri and points west, while other lines of Maxeys moved, like Doc Holliday’s family, through the plantation lands of the lower South and Texas. By