

“The Girl I Left Behind Me”
Army Officers’ Wives on the Great Plains 1866 -1900

Lesson Plan I: Understanding Family Life in a Great Plains Army Post

Recommended Grade Level: 6th through 12th grades

Description: This lesson consists of two exercises that can be used to help students understand what daily life was like for wives and families of Army officers. Students should be able to distinguish obligations that structured women’s lives from choices they made. Students should be able to analyze daily life and draw conclusions about Army women’s experience by use of comparison charts.

Time Required: Each activity requires 30 to 45 minutes (depending on grade level) after reading the section or subsection.

National History Standards:

- Standard 1 Chronological Thinking
- Standard 2 Historical Comprehension
- Standard 3 Historical Analysis and Interpretation

Background: Army officers’ wives performed many tasks in their daily lives which were similar to those of their mothers and sisters. They took care of their children, oversaw the cooking and cleaning in their households, attended to social duties. However, the circumstances in which they managed their families and households differed in that they lived in an Army post that was located in contested territory. School and church facilities were limited. From 1866 to 1900, these circumstances changed and officers’ wives found their lives much easier as time went on.

Preparation: Students should read “I could, I can, and I do! Daily Life in a Great Plains Post” to complete the exercises. For younger students, the teacher may select a subsection, such as “Military Housing,” “Climate and Environment,” “Procuring Food and Clothing,” or “Church and School.” The same exercises can be completed to understand a portion of Army women’s daily life.

Objectives: Students will learn to

- identify important facts
- organize evidence into categories
- compare and contrast activities of daily life
- draw conclusions about the role of women at frontier Army posts
- evaluate how Army women’s lives changed over time

Activity 1: Organizing Evidence. Read through the assigned material of this section. Working in small groups, use the boxes below to organize a list of the tasks and activities

of women who lived on Army posts. Decide into which column (pleasure, work, or duty) to place the activity. Teachers will want to discuss with students the meaning of the terms pleasure, work, and duty before beginning Activity I.

	Pleasure	Work	Duty
Military Housing			
Climate and Environment			
Procuring Food and Clothing			

Church and School			

Activity 2: Drawing Conclusions. Does this chart explain how much of an officers' wife's life was pleasant, hard work, or duty? Boys can imagine that they are the fathers of Army women. Have the girl students write a letter about her life in 1872 to her brother or father. What would the father think about his daughter's life has written? Would he think she was overworked? That she raised her family in unacceptable conditions? Or would he think she was happy and lived an ordinary life? Was her life exceptional (different from other women of her time) in some way?

What if the letter was dated 1890? Would the conclusions be different? In what ways did their lives change over time? Students can share their conclusions with the class.