As the author of three volumes of her memoir, Anne Ellis reveals her vitality in the wild and difficult environment of mining camps in the American West during the late nineteenth century. Unlike the ladies on the east coast, Anne Ellis, a miner’s wife, had to take responsibilities both inside and outside the home. Carol Bly notes that being a miner’s wife was a much harsher task than a farmer’s wife, because the miners shifted from stake to stake or camp to camp and this kind of life tended to set housewives’ “teeth on edge” (xi). Since both of Ellis’ husbands were moving one mining camp to another, she endured an isolated life and had to learn to solve the problems she faced alone in order to protect her home and children. Catherine J. Lavender points out that Ellis’s autobiography “set out to tell a new sort of story about the experiences of western women” (vii). In her memoir, Ellis illustrated the “mundane concerns that a western woman of extremely modest means would notice every day” and drew the reader’s “attention to the pleasures of her life, ordinary or not” (vii). Lavender also mentions that home provided “the narrative thread for much of Ellis’s story” (vii). In her memoir, Ellis “argued against the popular stereotype of women’s vulnerability among a crowd of men” (Lavender x). Her work thus offers “a fascinating portrait of the everyday lives of western women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Lavender x). Besides this, the traditional role a housewife changed significantly after the industrial revolution; that is, women began to engage in paid work outside the home. For example, the unstable salary of her husband meant
that Ellis was often impoverished and so she had to seek employment to care for her children. As a poor woman in a male-dominated mining camp, Ellis transformed herself to become an active participant in the Wild West. Escaping the stereotypical image of the pioneer woman who was obsessed with working outside and inside the home, Ellis also connected with the world outside the mining camp by reading. Though the title of her autobiography claim to present the life of the “ordinary” woman, Ellis accomplished much by exercising her domestic management. Based on the works of these critics, and analyzing Anne Ellis’s family conditions, work and migration, this paper will explore how this author survived on the frontier and became a person who constructed her own home based on her role as a housewife.

During the nineteenth century, the concept of home was challenged by the rise of industry. For a long time, home was seen to represent an “oasis in the desert, a sanctuary where sympathy, honor, virtue are assemble, where disinterested love is ready to sacrifice everything at the altar of affection” (Cott 64). Dolores Hayden points out that “cooking food, caring for children, and cleaning house, [were] tasks often thought of as ‘woman’s work’ to be performed without pay in domestic environment” (3). Most of women of the time worked “alongside their husbands and children on subsistence farms, doing the hard work necessary for the family to survive” (Hayden 12). When working in agriculture, husbands and wives were “obviously dependent upon one another economically” (Allen 12). However, after the industrial revolution, women began to be hired in factories to make up for a shortage of labor, and thus can be seen as “the first industrial proletariat” (Allen 12). In Polly Wynn Allen’s view, the changes that occurred with the rise of industry not only exaggerates “gender differences in [an] extreme way” but also assigns “distinctive roles to men and women” (13). With regard to marriage, husbands still needed to go to the factory
work and thus wives were no longer seen as “economic partners” of their husbands, but as “economic dependent[s]” (Allen 13). Housewives functioned as an unpaid workforce in the home, with all domestic matters being seen as part of a woman’s natural responsibility. Consequently, the exploitation of women’s “domestic labor by men was the most basic cause of women’s inequality” (Hayden 3). Women were not only isolated economically, but also spacially as the prevailing view in the nineteenth century maintained that “it was appropriate for men but not for women to leave home in pursuit of wages” (Allen 15). This was based on the idea that “the home required women’s moral and spiritual presence” (Allen 15). This ideology also characterized “the strenuous processes of feeding, cleaning, and nurturing people as something other than socially valuable labor, classifying them not as ‘work’ but rather as the natural expression of woman’s inherently giving, nurturant character” (Allen 15). During this period, most American women continued to “wrestle with a very strenuous daily schedule of domestic chores” (Allen 14). With regard to the industrial revolution, some feminists argued that “the role of the housewife and the design of the domestic workplace must evolve in a more directive direction” (Hayden 12). As industry continued to develop, a growing amount of infrastructure was built that made the “household more physically dependent” (Hayden 12). This freed women from much of the burden of maintaining a household, and some material feminists suggested that women must “control these new services and use them as their base of economic power” (Hayden 12). Accordingly, while domesticity confines women, it also liberates them.

In the late nineteenth century, the period of Anne Ellis’ memoirs, many women such as immigrants, widows, and free blacks, faced a continuous struggle to survive (Allen 12). Unlike middle-class women who were enthroned as the spiritual icons in
the domestic sphere, working-class women had to handle their duel identities, as both a money-earner and a housewife. The move west in the U.S. at this time gave some working-class woman a way to escape the limitation which oppressed on them. The mass migrations that took place at this time often involved whole families. Katherine Harris views the vitality of women’s labor during the pioneering period between 1873 and 1920, as a symbol of the opening up liberation of new female frontiers. Moreover, the material conditions of pioneering life were quite different from those of urban life on the east coast. People who moving west had to get across the great prairies, and wives who did so also has to take care of the household as well as deal with the various tasks that arose when settling in a new camp. These women thus had more contact with the outside world than housewives in the east. Since pioneering families often had financial problems, the women in such groups were much more conscious of the lack of money in their family than those in the east. Women’s understanding of domesticity was thus very different in the west than on the east coast as they had to work with their husbands on many tasks, such as chopping, farm work. This shared responsibility meant that pioneer wives become more equal with their husbands. Harris notes that the shortage of the manpower and the relative isolation of the family unit in the west “forced its members to greater reliance on each other” and this phenomenon also “played a part in promoting mutuality between the sexes” (175).

Some critics claim that work of such women helped them to overcome some of the social limitations that they would otherwise face whereas other critics highlight the fact that these women were still subject to the male authority. Elliot West points out that, unlike the much more stable farm life, the mining towns were the “harshest places to live upon principle...and young are almost surely to be led away” (150). The collapse of morality in such camps presented a threat to the workers and their families
and especially the concept of Victorian womanhood. Under the standards of the day, a few common stereotypes were used to divide frontier women into good and bad women (Jameson 145). Elizabeth Jameson notes that images of genteel civilizers and sunbonneted helpmates reflected the ideals of womanhood, and that good women were taught the “cardinal virtues of womanhood”: piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness to male authority (146). However, Jameson writes that the helpmate might also be viewed as an “oppressed drudge” at home (146). Although some historians counter this passive image by “emphasizing the hard work” frontier women did, their efforts tend to be regarded as the “stoic endurance of oppressed wives” (Jameson 146). There is thus no agreement in the literature as to whether the labor that frontier women engaged in represented a form of exploitation or liberation.

Harris clarifies these two arguments with regards to the issues of women’s labor, one believing that the industrial revolution strengthened the exploitation of women, and the other that it increased their rights at home. Adopting the latter view, Harris states that the “western emphasis on the role of helpmate gave women more opportunities than they had had before” because “they had a greater share of responsibility and decision-making in the family” (165). Harris points out that everyone in a frontier family might “contribute to the family cash economy” (171). In some feminists’ view, these “economist and spatial changes should take place under women’s control” (Hayden 17). Compared to women in the east, women on the frontier were able to enter the public sphere at a much earlier date. Through communication and interaction with the others on the frontier, many women began to express their opinions and gradually liberate themselves from the limitations of Victorian American womanhood gradually. The ideal of Victorian womanhood was “far from the reality for homesteaders or for working-class women in mining towns”
(Jameson 150). With its expression of an especially strong will, the autobiography of Anne Ellis exemplified and embodies the pioneering woman.

Born in 1875, Anne Ellis was part of a second generation of a mining family. In her autobiography, published in 1929, she not only provided readers with a graphic view of western life but also showed how women in mining camps entered the private sphere and escaped the restrictions of the ideal of womanhood. In mining towns, there was not any clear division of men’s and women’s responsibilities, as the main goal of a family was to survive. According to Jameson, in frontier’s daily life, family survival on the frontier depended on “flexibility and interdependence in work roles” (150).

Men could cook and take care of sick children, while women could plow, plant, and harvest. Because of the difficulties they faced in struggling to survive, a western couple would “understood the labor involved in each other’s work and respected one another for it” (151). Different from the homestead life, life in a mining town was much more severe. In a miner’s family, the husband moved along with the camps, and the workload of a housewife was increased both inside and outside that home. Ellis depicts her mother as the model of a pioneering woman. Ellis’s father did not migrated with the mining camp but abandoned his family when she was very young. Ellis mother thus had to work along to support her family, even when she remarried.

Each time Ellis saw her mother, there was “a baby on her arm, working, working, ever hopeful, seeing something to laugh at, cooking for the men, feeding the cattle at night, doctoring both the men and cattle” (12). Besides the household, Ellis’s mother also earned some money by sewing or doing laundry. When Ellis’s mother died, her epitaph described was “A brave soldier killed on duty” (168). Ellis’s mother led the typical life of a mining woman within a woman’s community that “revolved around the female life cycle and around women’s work” (Jameson 148). The harsh
environments and uncertain incomes that pioneer families encountered when moving west meant that the women in such communities were more likely to enter the public sphere, and thus they became more autonomous and aggressive.

During her whole life, Ellis suffered grinding poverty throughout her life, losing two husbands and one daughter, and crossing the plains three times, from Missouri to Colorado. When Ellis was young and unmarried, she dreamed about the interior of her future home by reading the ladies’ magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*. Compared with the refined house described in the magazine, young Ellis is depressed by the “rawness of her cabin home” (West 58), and dreams of better place. As Elliot West notes, “the Victorian woman’s obligation[was] to make of her family’s dwelling place a proper setting for fulfilling her moral responsibilities” (58). Ellis got married twice, but she soon realized that her two times marriage did not save her from poverty; otherwise, both of them trapped her into a vicious cycle of poverty. Within thirty years, she kept moving among mining camps with her husbands. The movement was not the pursuing of romantic love but “the search, sometimes desperate, for the means of living” (West 47). Ellis, in her first marriage, was aware of the crisis of her family finance. She had not only to do the house chores but also to feed her two kids especially when her husband shifted to another mining camp and left her only a few dollars. Everyday she “washed the children’s clothes in [her] room” and “locked the children in and went and bought a few provisions, always looking up at the window on [her] return, to see Neita’s golden curls. She would be watching for [her]” (199-200). At the beginning of her first marriage, Ellis daily life was shaped by “family concerns related to childbearing and childrearing” (Jameson 150). Lavender elucidates that Anne Ellis was “like innumerable other western women, prepared these meals on a daily basis, alone, from scratch, in a movable kitchen” (xi). Although far “too tired much of the
time, midst all her brave contrivances to keep the children warm, fed, and clothed”, Ellis wasn’t “the stereotype of a driven, unthinking person” (Bly ix). The illusion of her ideal marriage life frustrated Ellis; however, she soon awakened from her false imagination and became to consider making herself survive from the financial crisis of her family.

While her husband worked in a remote mining camp, Ellis struggled to live when she had no money to pay her rent. “I have heard of pawnshops, so take the watch my father gave me, lock the children in and go out to..., walk boldly in, and get four dollars and a ticket” (200). Ellis’s financial condition became even worse and worse after her husband died in an explosion. At that time, most “cash-producing jobs matrons performed were carried on in the home environment,” or at least “did not take them away from homestead” (Harris 172). During that period, it was difficult for a young woman who lost husband to get a loan because they were seen as on the hunt for a new husband. Ellis first paid work outside the home was in a bakery. However, she “made a poor out at it” and could see each day that she was “going behind” (208). She thus decided to change jobs and managed a boarding house instead, selling many of her possessions and investing in a four-room house. Ellis’s new life started with six boarders, all men. Every day she tried hard to “have good meals and still keep the grocery bills down, and they were good meals, too good, as each week [Ellis] [went] behind ” (209). Harris notes that women often took in boarders, “charging them at the rate...for food, accommodations, and such additional amenities as washing, ironing, and mending” (172). Ellis’s domestic abilities, provided free for her family, thus became a way to help her and her daughters to restart their lives life after losing a husband and a father.

Cooking was the main way that Ellis maintained her business when running the
boarding house. Jennifer S. Brantley notes that cooking was “something noble” for Ellis (154). When her daughter, Joy, had abscesses in her ears but then soon recovered, Ellis said “luck has turned, Joy gets better, they all get better, thanks, they say, to my good cooking” (217). For Ellis, cooking is a way to save her family and also to obtain a sense of achievement. Cooking is thus no longer a family routine but the means to demonstrate her accomplishment. Ellis showed her pride in this in her autobiography writing that “I [Ellis] am a good cook and manager... Many time I have seen men coming off shift stop at the salon for a drink, and I knew they had done a hard day’s work.... So in my home there was a hearty breakfast, fruit, a cooked breakfast food, meat, potatoes, and usually hot biscuit, coffee-cake or cookies, and coffee...Each day I baked pie and cake. Miners did and do live well, when they are working” (233). For the miners, Ellis also played the role of a surrogated mother. Brantley quotes Ellis’s description of the job she felt when cooking “Give me ... a well-cooked, well-served meal, a bouquet, and a sunset, and I can do more for a man’s soul than all the cant ever preached. I can even do it without a sunset” (154). At Hayden notes, some feminists’ also “demanded the transformation of the private domestic workplace, the kitchen, in accordance with... ‘domestic evolution’” (17). For Ellis, cooking and doing household chores were both way of homes was a way of overcoming the barriers of isolation (Brantley 154), and in her life she built “a sense of community among poor women who usually [had] no voice at all” (Brantley 155). According to Brantley, running a boarding house is a way of “creating and tending to her [Ellis’] own small community through making a house and cooking” (163). However, after Ellis married Herbert, she moved with him to another mining camp and did not run a boarding house any more. The financial status of the family did not improve with this move, and was soon negatively affected by Herbert’s health. In order to support the family,
Ellis got a job with very relatively high wages, with a “place in a laundry, five dollars per day” (250). When Herbert became sick, Ellis got another job helping a family to cook, and then sewing for a dressmaker. Despite all these setbacks, Ellis never gave up her struggle.

According to the traditional Victorian view of womanhood, women has to “kept house,...cooked, canned, sewed, washed, and ironed” (Harris 170), all of which was unpaid. The domestic sphere thus became a prison that confined women in an isolated condition. In contrast, the harsh realities of daily life meant that women on the frontier could escape some of these limitations. Jameson notes that the interplay among gender, family roles, and economics shapes the lives of western women, which were complicated and based on the need to survive (158). The breaking down of barriers between the public and private spheres pushed frontier women to become increasingly active and independent. Ellis was forced to rely on her domestic abilities to support herself and her children after she lost her mother and both husbands. However, by getting paid work outside the home, Ellis was able to demonstrate her power and thus serve as a good example for her daughters. As a frontier woman, Ellis was always busy try to survive. However, through her exercise of the domestic management, she re-constructed her life through the role of a housewife.

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