

Go West, Sensitive New-Age Guy



In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the American frontier, while it lasted, defined American life. More than a century later, Turner's "frontier thesis" still tops every AP history student's cheat sheet, but historians have begun to wonder whether anything can be salvaged from a theory that defines the frontier as a boundary between "savagery and civilization." Turner's thesis is now routinely dismissed as outdated at best and racist at worst. In fancier, post-colonialist circles, "frontier" has become the new F word.

And now, just when you thought the frontier was dead, comes *Frontier House*, a new six-part PBS series chronicling the experiences of three ordinary modern American families sent to the frontier to endure the rigors of life as 1880s homesteaders. Co-produced by Channel 13/WNET in New York and Britain's Wall to Wall Television (producers of the BBC's *1900 House*), *Frontier House* won't be aired until 2002. But the filming begins this spring, when the *Frontier House* families will start their six-month stint in rural Montana. Each family will be given 160 acres of land and a wagonful of seeds, axes, and cookbooks. Like all homesteaders, they'll begin by building houses, "relying exclusively on the tools, techniques, technology, and resources they would have had in the 1880s." No Home Depot, no spackle, no Tyvek wrap. *Little House on the Prairie* meets *Temptation Island*?

A mere four hundred British families applied to live for three months in London's retrofitted *1900 House* (see [Talk of the Past, September 2000](#)), but nearly ten times as many Americans are seeking to live for twice as long in the far more physically grueling *Frontier House*. Why? Consider the home lives of some of the thirty-six hundred American families eager to participate. As part of the application process, each was asked, "What's the most challenging thing you and your family have ever experienced?" Among the responses (posted at the show's [Website](#)): a Florida man who was "fatally shot" but miraculously survived, a New York teenager whose mother and sister were attacked by a neighbor's pit bull ("not too badly, but still"), and a Mississippi family "held hostage at 4 a.m. by a crazed gunman." Yikes. No wonder these people want to go back in time.

Frontier House families will be in grave danger of accidentally amputating fingers with scythes and herniating disks while pushing plows, but they probably won't have to worry about muggers, pit bulls, and crazed gunmen. None of the applicants seem to have any idea what they're getting into (and how could they?), but, like actual homesteaders, they do appear to believe they'll find a better life—a particular kind of better life, a touchy-feely, New Age of good old days. Asked what they hope to get out of the experience, a California family answered that they expected to "really get in touch with each other and ourselves without all the noise of the modern world." One man from Washington confessed, "I need a direction in my life." (How 'bout West?) And a couple from California philosophized, "A great challenge brings a person great personal power."

Time travel as an opportunity for personal growth? Series producer Simon Shaw seems to agree with this sense of the past. "*Frontier House* is as much about personal discovery as it is historical," he explains. "The experience will undoubtedly provide our pioneers with an opportunity to contemplate much of what gets lost in the blur of life in modern society: values, relationships, emotions, priorities."

The frontier of *Frontier House* is not a boundary between savagery and civilization. It's the boundary between an emotionally shabby, technologically bountiful *now* and an emotionally vital, technologically impoverished *then*. "I have been looking for this kind of opportunity to be a catalyst for a new trajectory to my life, propelling me in new directions like a comet around a star," writes one New York applicant. *Frontier House* families don't need Frederick Jackson Turner; they need Robert Bly. The last frontier? The endless frontier of the self.

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