Frontier House: Reality Television and the Historical Experience

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Most television audiences view the genre of reality television primarily as entertainment or amusement. Millions of viewers tune into programs such as *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Bachelor* because of the excitement, the unexpectedness, and the twists and turns taken each week. While reality shows are no doubt entertaining, this genre has also been adapted for educational purposes. PBS’s *Frontier House*, a six-part program that aired on affiliate stations in 2002, combined the reality genre with the educational documentary that is the hallmark of public television programming.¹ This hybrid genre was effective because the components of reality and documentary addressed different objectives in the narrative of the program. While the meticulously researched documentary elements established the program as a legitimate and accurate historical account, the reality portion — in which present-day families attempted to live in the manner of 1883 frontier settlers — allowed both the participants and audience to examine and negotiate their beliefs about the myth of the Old West and contemporary American life.

**Public Television and the Documentary Genre**

PBS was brought into existence by a 1967 Congressional act, with the aim of television for common good and overt educational and informational purposes. It has been described as “a vehicle to bring quality, diversity and public interest goals to all Americans.”² Over the years, the channel has strived to inform and teach its audience through programs that are vaguely academic in nature. Because of its non-commercial format, PBS funds its operation and programming with contributions from viewers, as well as federal and corporate grants. The non-commercial aspect of public programming further reinforces the educational mission and

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¹ Beth Hoppe, Alex Graham, *Frontier House*, Thirteen/WNET, New York, PBS. 2002
ideology of public television: the programming found on PBS is seen to be less about entertainment and more about pedagogy.³

Documentary is the most prominent genre of programming on PBS, as exemplified by such shows as Ken Burns’ American Experience, the award-winning cornerstone of PBS stations. Burns, a historian and filmmaker who addresses topics ranging from jazz to baseball and the Civil War, is considered by many the foremost documentarian in the contemporary United States. Tracing the experiences of historic individuals through photographs, diaries, artifacts, and other primary evidence, Burns uses the documentary genre to depict portraits of historic American life. His work exhibits a mélange of primary evidence combined with the expertise of prominent historians, and many view them as a paradigm within the genre.⁴

The documentary genre itself is one of the oldest in television. With its reliance on visual evidence, expository narration, and the authority of experts, the genre presents itself as an authoritative and accurate voice; an informed portrayal of its subject. Paula Rabinowitz states that the contemporary documentary “claims its status as a truth-telling mode … which provokes its audience to a new understanding about social, economic, political, and cultural differences and struggles.”⁵ The documentary, unlike other television genres, is based directly on actual experiences and events and purports to offer a depiction of them. This genre, with its emphasis on “true” characterization and education, seems well fitted for public television and its stated mission of “public interest goals.” ⁶

⁴ See Ken Burns, The Civil War, JAZZ, Baseball, The American Experience, etc., PBS
However, there are also dangers that are inherent within the documentary genre’s “conceit of the real.” The documentarian and scholar Jill Godmilow, referring specifically to the work of Ken Burns, criticizes the filmmaker’s use of the “documentary as a kind of national therapy, producing a kind of mourning moment, a nostalgia for the past.” This critique, with its emphasis on the problems of a history that is imbued with patriotism, is reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche’s characterization of “monumental history,” as a narrative that resembles a “mythical romance.”

The idea of a biased telling of history is further expounded by Walter Benjamin, who makes the observation that a history, which is in the hands of and is complimentary to the nation-state (as is the history of Ken Burns) is one that is used to legitimize its present power and suppress any ideological, economic, or political resistance by the subject.

The type of history that is presented by the traditional documentary is also contradictory to the type of historical narrative now prevalent in the academic departments that provide reference for the documentary account. Theorists such as Mark Poster emphasize the fact that, because of a new understating of multiple social realities, the traditional type of top-down, “monumental history,” which focused on the impact of political decisions and social movements, has been replaced by a social and cultural inquiry, one that examines the experiences of a diverse and often overlooked population. Because of this development, the new historical account is rife with complex and contradictory ideologies. As Joan Scott states, “histories are written from fundamentally different — indeed, irreconcilable — perspectives or standpoints, not one of

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which is complete or completely ‘true.’”

Because of its reliance on monumental history, the type of documentary that is prominently featured on PBS, then, might not be sufficient as a didactic and edificatory mode of the “absolute truth.”

Because it presents a historical narrative with the conceit of the “real,” and since it uses many of the conventions of documentary (experts, artifacts, and expository narrative), PBS’ recent television program *Frontier House* can be at least partially classified as a documentary. This would place it in danger of the same critique that emerges of other documentaries. However, *Frontier House* can also be described as a reality show. This hybridization might aid *Frontier House* in presenting a narrative that is more distanced from the danger of monumental history.

**Frontier House: Background**

*Frontier House* is based on a similar program, *The 1900 House*, which originated in Great Britain and initially aired on the national BBC networks. *The 1900 House* depicted the efforts of a British family to live in the manner of the Victorian era. Their struggles to get accustomed to the lack of electricity, frozen meals, and other aspects of contemporary life were played out in six episodes and were popular with both British and American audiences. The premise of *Frontier House* is based on a historical moment that is well documented and well known to most contemporary Americans. In 1883, before it became a state, the Montana Territory was opened to homesteaders. In response to overpopulation and industrialization in Eastern cities, thousands of settlers moved to the West where they filed homestead claims on 150 acres of land. If the stakeholders could survive on the land for five years, the federal government

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11 See Simon Shaw, *The 1900 House*, PBS
awarded ownership of their claim to them. Only thirty percent of the homesteaders endured the required five years, but the mythology of the homesteader has persevered within American popular culture.¹²

A romanticized portrait of the Old West has been prevalent in American ideology since this time. Starting with Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous statement about “the closing of the frontier,” and moving through ideas such as “manifest destiny” and the portrait of the American as a rugged individual in the vein of Theodore Roosevelt, cultural expectations of the American frontier have been closely tied to nationalistic ideals of what it means to be American.¹³ The American frontier, in patriotic ideology, is a symbol for the land ownership, exploration, individuality, and self-sufficiency that are all characteristics idealized in America. These ideals have been present in American cultural production, from Owen Wister’s *Virginian* to television programs such as *Little House on the Prairie*.

The historical moment of frontier settlement and the popular mythology that has grown to surround it are described in the opening moments of *Frontier House*. This introduction helps to define the program as one that is in line with the traditional mode of historical documentary, and one that, as a “mourning moment,” is certainly dangerous to the current, more inclusive and complex mode of historical narrative. It is interesting to note that, compared to its predecessor *1900 House*, the topic matter for *Frontier House* is explicitly American. The uniqueness of the American experience, as well as present-day expectations and ideologies held in the United States, suggest that *Frontier House* may also seek to make claims about national ideology.

The producers of *Frontier House* intentionally set out to dispel the myth of the Old West by placing modern Americans directly within the diogesis of the mythology. In the program,

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¹² *Frontier House*, Episode 1: “The American Dream”
three contemporary families are chosen to live in the manner of 1883 homesteaders for a period of five months. Outfitted with period artifacts such as clothes, tools, and livestock, their objective is to settle a claim by building shelter and planting crops. In the end, they are graded not only on their ability to survive but also on their preparations for the long winter ahead. Before they are taken to their land claims — in a two-day trip by covered wagon over mountains and rivers — they are given a two-week tutorial where they learn to cook, build, and plant in the manner of 1883 homesteaders.

The three families that participate in *Frontier House* come from disparate geographical, economic, and social situations. Gordon Clune and his wife Adrienne, who is an Irish immigrant, along with their three children and a niece, are wealthy Californians. Gordon Clune is the president of an aerospace manufacturing company and the family is accustomed to fine living. In contrast, Karen Glenn, a school nurse, her husband Mark, a pharmacist, and her two children come from Tennessee. They are active in their church and come from a middle-class economic bracket. Nate Brooks is an event coordinator from Massachusetts, and his father, Rudy, a retired corrections officer, initially accompanies him. Midway through the project, Nate’s fiancée Kristin, a social worker, arrives at the site and, after a wedding ceremony, replaces Rudy as Nate’s *Frontier House* cohabitant.

The pains taken to ensure the historical accuracy of *Frontier House* are made evident during the tutorial in which every aspect of frontier living is researched and explored. Susan Cain, the expert on domestic living, explains that the canned goods and seeds that the settlers will be given are representative, both in kind and in inventory, of records and logs from Montana settlers and shopkeepers of the time. Rawhide Johnson, the colorfully named livestock expert, describes the great effort made to find the representative size, breed, and age of milking cows
that would have been available to and owned by homesteaders in 1883. In a moment rarely seen on any genre of television, female participants are shown a period sanitary belt and told that tampons and maxi pads, certainly unavailable in 1883, will not be an option during their five-month tenancy on the homestead.\(^{14}\) The research exhibited throughout *Frontier House* is thorough and helps add weight to its characterization as an accurate historical narrative. The production techniques, the presence of experts, and the use of artifacts and careful explanation of their functions and origins help at least partially identify *Frontier House* as a documentary, in the sense that it presents a researched and representative account of a specific era in American history. The program’s venue, PBS, also identifies this show within its genre.

In addition, some of the goals of *Frontier House* are overtly “truth telling” and educational, another hallmark of the documentary genre. These qualities are evidenced by the detailed descriptions of homesteader life and experience and the manner in which the producers of the program intend that *Frontier House* be viewed. This is made most evident on the show’s companion website, a detailed account of all aspects of the program. Like most sites that accompany contemporary television programming, it gives background on the premise of *Frontier House*, information about the producers, an episode guide, and short biographies of all of the participants. It also has extensive information about frontier life and provides a historical background for the time, complete with a bibliography featuring both primary texts (such as journals and manuals) and scholarly accounts.\(^{15}\)

Moreover, lesson plans for elementary and high school teachers are provided, which draw directly on material from the program for lessons on American history. In one lesson plan, “Oh, Do You Remember the Clunes from L.A.?” students perform an analysis of a narrative song

\(^{14}\) *Frontier House*, Episode 1: “The American Dream”
written about homesteading in the 1840’s and use other primary sources of the time and their knowledge of the experience from *Frontier House* to write additional verses. In another, “Free Land,” students study the Homestead Act to see how federal legislation affected the choices and lives of Americans. The lesson plans and content of the *Frontier House* companion website help to emphasize the fact that this program was conceived with the intent of education, another trait of documentary programming.

**Reality Television: Event vs. Experience**

There are elements of *Frontier House*, however, that belie the influence of reality programming. In order to address the way in which this program exemplifies the reality television genre, it is necessary to first define “reality television.” In the simplest of terms, as defined by Jeremy Butler using words from the work of Bill Nichols, reality television “presents to viewers the interaction of social actors in the historical world.” As opposed to fictional television genres (such as situation-comedies or dramas), reality television presents itself as an authentic record of relations and reactions between non-actor individuals who address situations in the way that they would in the real world. While some reality programs, such as *The Real World*, are observational — meaning the producers do not interact with the participants but merely record their actions — other genres are “gamedocs” (i.e. *Survivor, The Apprentice*) in which the participants are also contestants, vying in challenges toward a specific prize.

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While reality television certainly bears some resemblance to the documentary format, there are several important distinctions. Foremost is the fact that while the documentary can be said to present itself as the “truth,” the reality show is more concerned with the “authentic.” These two words seem to be interchangeable, but the subtle differentiation between them emphasizes the contrasts in form between the two genres. Documentaries typically present an account of an event. While there is some reflection of individuals’ perceptions of the event, it is the accuracy aspect of the narrative that is emphasized. On the other hand, the reality program is more concerned with the social actors; their situation takes a secondary role. Reality television, thus, is not so much an account of the event, but of the experience. Documentary focuses on actions whereas reality television turns its attention to the actors. It is personalities that make reality shows memorable, as opposed to specific incidents.

The reality genre has been around in some form or another, almost as long as television itself. In the 1950s, programs such as Candid Camera placed unsuspecting civilians into difficult or unexpected situations and recorded their reactions. In 1972, PBS aired a program called American Family, which documented the lives of the upper-middle-class Loud family from Santa Barbara, California. Viewers watched as the parents experienced marital troubles and eventually divorced and as the oldest son revealed to his family that he was gay. Both of these programs may be considered “reality,” although they preceded the current crop of reality programs by more than 20 years.

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In contemporary times, the reality television phenomenon has exploded. Starting in 1991 with MTV’s *The Real World*, dozens of reality programs now vie for attention and compete for ratings on both network and cable television. These programs run the gamut of every possible type of topic and experience, from romance (*The Bachelor*) to career advancement (*The Apprentice*), childrearing (*Nanny 911*), personal improvement (*The Swan*), bygone celebrity (*The Surreal Life*), talent and showmanship (*American Idol*), physical and mental endurance (*Fear Factor*), and even paternity (*Who’s Your Daddy?*). The reasons for this explosion are manifold and can be examined through both production and reception. From the side of production, reality programs and their absence of highly paid actors and writers are less expensive to produce. From the angle of reception, Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray remark that there is a “viewer fascination with the televisual display of ‘real’ people.”

Mary Beth Haralovich and Michael W. Trosset further observe, in their analysis of *Survivor*, that the “essential unpredictability” is inherent in the maxim “expect the unexpected.” There are myriad other reasons with which to account for the popularity of reality television, arguably the most prominent genre in television today.

**Frontier House and Reality Television**

While the historical narrative and attention to artifacts might initially locate *Frontier House* within the genre of documentary, there are several features of the program that indicate aspects of its conceit as characteristic of reality television. Foremost is the participation of non-celebrity ‘everyday people,’ who have agreed to be part of a project in which their experiences

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are recorded. These social actors are important because they behave within the environment of the project in the same manner in which they would behave in their daily lives. Their opinions, reactions, and emotions are not simulated but instead are accurate reflections in the context of the experience. Frontier House, then, becomes not only an account of the life of historical homesteaders in 1883 Montana but also the story of everyday people’s perception of this life.

The importance of the experiences of the participants in Frontier House is also made evident by the fact that, in addition to the presence of a full film crew to record their activities, each family is given its own camcorder. This aspect is significant in both the project and the final production because it emphasizes the weight the participant’s opinion is given. By casting the families in the role of documentarian, the producers of Frontier House indicate that their thoughts and reflections are essential to the understanding of the narrative. Using the camcorders, the participants tape the activities they find important and address the viewers directly along their experience.

Additionally, the presence of the camcorders contrasts sharply with the period environment prevalent throughout the rest of the program. While the families have to use leaves for toilet paper and are not allowed any medication except for the whiskey that was a common remedy during frontier times, they have access to the video recorder, a device not available in 1983, let alone 1883. Perhaps this detail may be excused by the fact that other implementations of televisual surveillance are present, such as the unseen film crew that is also recording the activities on site. However, the fact that the families themselves are not only allowed, but encouraged, to use camcorders is a startling contradiction to the other aspects of their existence. This feature demonstrates the way in which that the experiences of the participants of Frontier House take precedence over the historical narrative of the show. In the documentary genre, an
accurate account of homestead life would supersede the need for participant commentary. The importance of this aspect, however, illustrates the influence of the reality television genre on Frontier House.

The fact that participants are not stopped or penalized when they deviate from the diogesis of homestead life is another way in which the experience of the participants dominates the Frontier House narrative. The primary culprits on the show are the Clune family. On several occasions, members of the Clune household break the rules of the historical frontier lifestyle. Adrienne Clune ventures to the home of some non-participatory neighbors and trades her own garden vegetables for frozen steak.24 Gordon Clune finds a mattress at a junk heap and smuggles it into his house.25 Although a camera crew witnesses each act, no effort is made to prevent the Clunes from deviating from the historical narrative. Moreover, they are not reprimanded on site or in the script of the program. Again, the experience of how contemporary families deal with both expectations and experiences of 1883 Montana takes priority over the accuracy of the historical narrative. The Clunes’ deviation from the rules of Frontier House and the producers’ treatment of these transgressions show that the principle of the program is not only a historical account, but also one of mediation between the documentary and the reality show.

Interestingly, Gordon Clune’s explanation for his actions is that a major characteristic of historic homesteaders was their ingenuity and their willingness to “do anything it took to survive.”26 Clune sees his breaking the rules as an example of the frontier ideology and, thus, permissible in the context of the project.27 The fact that Clune’s impression of the frontier myth takes precedence in his participation of the project — as well as the fact that this is shown and

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24 Frontier House, Episode 4: “Survival”
25 Frontier House, Episode 6: “The Reckoning”
26 Frontier House, Episode 4: “Survival”
27 Frontier House, Episode 6: “The Reckoning”
even emphasized on the program when it easily could have been edited out — underscores the importance of the narrative of the individual impressions of the participants. This emphasis on the actions, opinions, and expectations of the participants of Frontier House indicates the influence of the reality genre. But if the overarching goal of Frontier House is education about a specific historical era, is the intentional deviation from a documentary format contradictory to this aim? As Frontier House takes on the characteristics and personalities of its participants, is its truth-telling activity compromised?

**Reconciling Experience with Education**

The combination of the documentary and reality genres initially seems problematic to the ultimate goal of truth telling and education that is defined by the producers of Frontier House and PBS, because it places the objective historical narrative in a position that is secondary to the subjective experience of the project participants. A closer examination, however, of the way in which these two genres work together shows how the combination of features from documentary and reality might still serve as a powerful and effective pedagogical tool.

The reason lies partially in another stated goal of Frontier House. As previously discussed, popular culture is heady with inaccurate and aggrandized notions of frontier living and homesteading. A main theme of the narrative of the program is its stated goal to dispel the romanticized, sensationalized, and often inaccurate mythology of the American frontier. In both the opening narration of the program and on the companion website, Frontier House is billed as “one of the few accurate representations of homesteading life.”

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program are made to portray the truth of the frontier experience and correct the cultural
misconceptions about the history of this era.

The show’s identification with the documentary genre allows it to address these
inaccuracies using the artifacts, primary accounts, and scholarly research that are hallmarks of
the documentary tradition. A main misconception prevalent in romanticized accounts of the Old
West is that of ethnic homogeneity. Popular culture, such as Little House on the Prairie, as well
as most films about the time, portrays the frontier as uniformly white. In reality, as the voiceover
of Frontier House informs viewers, Americans of all races and ethnicities made their home on
the frontier. One of the ways this is illustrated is with the general store where the Frontier House
settlers purchase and sell goods. The store is called Hop Sing’s, and the proprietor is a Chinese
man. As the narrator of the program explains, records indicate that there was indeed a store
called Hop Sing’s, run by a Chinese immigrant in Montana in 1883, and that, in fact, many
Chinese Americans moved to the frontier in hopes of building a better life for themselves.29

In the same manner, one of the participant families, Rudy and Nate Brooks, is African-
American. Again citing historical records, the narrator explains that, contrary to popular belief,
many African-American homesteaders moved from the East to escape the limitations created by
racism and discrimination and for the opportunity of land ownership.30 The use of historical
records to put forward an account presenting itself as realistic by example and the mode of the
omniscient and unseen voiceover is characteristic of the documentary genre and an effectual way
in which Frontier House begins to address and to set right the Turnerian myth of the frontier. In
the manner of the new style of cultural history, the narrative of Frontier House shifts to an

29 Frontier House, Episode 2: “The Promised Land”
30 Frontier House, Episode 1: “The American Dream”
account encompassing multiple social realities. Such understanding is crucial to a more accurate portrayal of the Old West.

This model of truth telling in and of itself, however, might ultimately fall short of dispelling the powerful cultural myth of the Old West. The presuppositions most individuals hold are informed by myriad of cultural references: television, films, books, and academic accounts like Turner’s “The Closing of the Frontier,” and documentaries such as those of Ken Burns, which purport to be legitimate and truthful sources. Mere information, even if it is backed up by primary evidence such as records, artifacts, or accounts, cannot always undo the influence of a national mythology such as that of the Old West. This aspect is evidenced in several instances on Frontier House, such as in the episode where Gordon Clune excuses his deviation from the rules with his image of homesteader ingenuity.

In another example, Karen Glenn refuses to perform the indoor household work, typical of frontier women, that has been assigned to her. Instead she chooses to wear her husband’s pants — both literally and figuratively — when she asserts herself as the leader of the family and travels to Hop Sing’s to purchase and trade goods, a task that historically fell to the males of the household. She explains that she feels herself to be “more of a Calamity Jane figure.” Like Clune’s rationalization, Glenn’s identification with an atypical role model prevalent in the Old West legend and her refusal of the reality of the experience of historical homesteading women points to the power of the frontier myth in the face of contrary evidence and the insufficiency of the tools of the documentary model alone to dispel this myth.

How then, can the producers of Frontier House achieve their goal of telling the truth about frontier living? The answer might lie in another aspect of the new social and cultural history used to illustrate the complexities of historical life. Joan Scott writes that, in order to

31 Frontier House, Episode 3: “Til Death Do Us Part”
move away from monumental history and achieve an understanding of the contradictions of
experience, historians must work to understand their own experiences, ideologies and frames of
reference when examining the evidence. Only then will an accurate account emerge.\textsuperscript{32}

By incorporating the reality genre into their account, the producers of \textit{Frontier House} are
allowing the project participants to do the type of work Scott describes. Through the information
provided them by the experts, they are presented with an accurate historical account informed by
records and artifacts. As they mediate their experience in the historical frontier and engage in the
research-based narrative put forth by the documentary, their own presuppositions and ideologies
of the myth of the Old West are put into contact, often conflicting with the realities of portrayal.
What emerges is a new understanding of the frontier era, as informed by experience.

It is interesting to note the choice of scholarly experts’ reflection on this emphasis on
experience. None of the experts who teach the participants about frontier life come from the
traditional academic and institutional background of typical documentary experts (such as those
in \textit{The American Experience}). Instead, they work in historical preservation or re-enaction.
Rawhide Johnson runs a cattle ranch, and Susan Cain develops interpretation programs at
historical sites.\textsuperscript{33} Even the choice of experts reflects the predominance of experience in the
conceit of \textit{Frontier House}.

During and after the project, all the participants comment on the fact that the reality of
the \textit{Frontier House} was very different from their expectations. By living this reality, their ideas
and ideals are changed. In watching these reactions unfold and in applying the events of \textit{Frontier
House} to their own ideologies, the television audience is given the tools, in the manner of Scott’s
historians, to begin to mediate their own understanding. They are shown the means to navigate

\textsuperscript{32} Scott, “Experience”
Retrieved 12 May, 2005
beliefs and realities with a narrative of the truth — via the documentary aspects of the program — and a model of engagement with the narrative — through the participants in the reality show of *Frontier House*. In the end, the hybridization of the documentary and reality genres allows for both the participants and the viewers of *Frontier House* to begin to negotiate their own ideas of the myth of the American frontier. In this way, the producers begin to achieve their goal of taking apart this myth.

**The Message of *Frontier House***

Aside from an accurate portrayal of the reality of the Old West, *Frontier House*’s juxtaposition of the historical and the contemporary experience might also present a critique of modernity. As the producers state on the companion website, the show “gave us a vivid picture of how far we have come, and maybe even a little of what we have lost along the way.” 34 This evolution is evident in the final portion of the program when the producers follow up on the participants six months after the completion of the project and they have returned to their real lives. Adrienne Clune, pictured in a large house equipped with the most modern of conveniences that seems to be the epitome of modern luxury, laments that she misses the closeness her family felt in the *Frontier House* project site and expresses her feeling of loneliness. Mark Glenn, who has separated from his wife, states that there “should be a support group for the 20th century,” and that he would like to be able to live self sufficiently, in the manner of 1883 homesteaders. 35 With these observations, it seems that the “little … [that has been] lost along the way” might be for the worse and not the better.

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35 *Frontier House*, Episode 6: “The Reckoning”
Throughout the program, the reliance of the participants on modern convenience is underscored in a way that is sometimes comic and often critical. The teenage Clune girls smuggle makeup to the project site and are genuinely upset when they must give it up. All of the women complain about the difficulty of cooking and cleaning without modern kitchen appliances. The younger members of the families miss movies, video games, soda, and many other staples of contemporary America. Oftentimes the family members are shown as ineffectual and incompetent, unable to complete tasks that would have been second nature in 1883, such as milking a cow or chopping wood. The continued emphasis on these aspects of the experience can perhaps be interpreted as a subtle critique of the inefficacies of modern Americans, who are highly dependent on such commodities. The interpretation of this critique, however, proves to be troubling since it places value in the ideal of the ‘rugged American’, itself a part of the romanticized mythology that Frontier House professes to dispel. Do the producers themselves, then, buy into this myth? Another way of reading this might be as a nod to the prevalence of ideologies and the difficulty of letting them go. In the manner of Joan Scott’s historians and the participants of the project, the narrative of the program might be referencing its own generic tendencies.

Frontier House is a fascinating example of the way in which television genres might be mixed, referenced, and combined. In this case, the narrative authority of the traditional documentary genre, when joined with the self-reflexivity of reality television, worked to create a historical narrative that was not only accurate, but also didactic. PBS, as well as BBC in Great Britain, are continuing this task with several other television projects based on the conceit of 1900 House and Frontier House. 1940’s House, Regency House Party, Colonial House, and Manor House each address different eras in history imbued with their own inaccurate and
romanticized assumptions. It will be interesting to see how this hybrid genre, with its pedagogic properties, might change popular understanding of the historic experience.
Works Cited


