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TURN OF THE CENTURY WOMEN'S CLUBS IN MONTANA

by

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In the grand tradition of western history, women have received little recognition. The major historians of this region, Turner, Webb, Billington and others have treated the women's role in brief, simplistic generalizations. Western women simply were not important to them or to their story of the west. According to T.A. Larson, most western historians mention one or two outstanding female figures and leave to the reader's imagination the lives and relationships of ordinary women. Yet surely there must be more to women on the frontier than is conveyed by the stories of Sacajawea, Helen Hunt Jackson, Narcissa Whitman or Calamity Jane.

In studying women of the west one finds a recurring pattern of categorization. As Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller point out in "Gentle Tamers Revisited"¹, western women traditionally fall into one of four groups. Influenced by the nineteenth century cult of true womanhood², which loosely defined women as being the guardians of virtue and morality, these groupings reflected what society expected of women and what they expected of themselves.

First, there was the gentle tamer stereotype which
viewed women as civilizers, the refined bearers of social values who made certain that men respected the Sabbath, ceased cursing and drinking, and who generally smoothed the rough edges of frontier society. The second category, sunbonneted helpmates, stressed woman's ability to fulfill mundane duties so that men could get on to more important things, such as raising wheat.

While these categories represented traditionally accepted roles for women, two other categories represented the other side of the feminine character. The "hell raisers" included characters like Calamity Jane who rejected the woman's traditional role in favor of one more suited to her own sense of individualism. Similarly the women who fell into the "bad women" category saw the west as an opportunity for freedom from social restraint. Where the east represented a culture steeped in tradition, the west had only a few old families to enforce social codes of behavior concerning women. The wide open spaces of the west along with its unfamiliar environment seemed to encourage individualism. It offered acceptance to unusual characters like Cattle Annie and Poker Alice.

Paula Petrik argues that the bad women went beyond stereotypes. Petrik documents the changes in Helena, Montana, 1865-1900, an era in which some women left
traditional work places like the home and schoolhouse, in favor of the less traditional dance halls and hurdy gurdys. These women, though removed from socially approved areas of influence still left their mark. Petrik contends that the presence of bad women types and their business success made it easier for women from all walks of life. Any woman could come and go as she pleased thanks to the loosening of social mores brought about by the so-called bad women. According to Petrik, as the bad women became an accepted part of the Helena social scene, they opened opportunities for other women to venture out of the home. But all of these categories overgeneralize about western frontier women and as such reflect a mythology about the west.

Women of the frontier, like women of today, cannot be easily categorized, either in their motives for immigrating or in their lifestyles once there. Some, of course, were reluctant to leave the comforts of "civilization", yet countless others actually looked forward to going west. Each woman came west with her own unique expectations. Yet, it was an immeasurable comfort to all women on the frontier to be able to communicate with each other. Through the development of personal relationships and social organizations, they could discuss such common problems as food, housing, and children with those in similar situations. Later, women's groups made possible cultural
and intellectual self-expression with other women, something especially welcome to women who had achieved a certain degree of financial stability and whose children were off to school.

Women gathered into clubs not only for literary pursuits (self-improvement) but also to reform their society. The cult of domesticity aligned women with other women to attack the immorality they observed around them and this alignment produced a strong feeling of sisterhood. The cult presented women with two conflicting messages, on the one hand it advised the nineteenth century woman to make the home her center of attention, to enshrine it with honor and to sacrifice everything for its protection. Yet, the cult also advised women to pursue, in a unified and organized fashion, a reforming effort outside of the home.\textsuperscript{3}

The women of Montana at the turn of the century wanted to use their position in society to the fullest extent, but they did not wish to change that position. They chose to focus on the cult's reformist message while at the same time accepting its domestic pronouncements. They also chose to avoid a total break with the world of divided spheres of influence--male in the public and female in the private--by focusing attention on traditionally feminine areas of concern; sanitation, education and the welfare of children.\textsuperscript{4}
Underlying these choices was the quiet yet persistent demand for self-expression and involvement outside of the home.

Conditions on the frontier discouraged a reassessment of the cult of true womanhood. Women assisted in accumulating land holdings, raised poultry, grew vegetable gardens, and helped with the milking. Aside from feeding the family, the money raised from selling milk, eggs, canned goods and butter was used to clothe the family or to buy more land. Women influenced the success or failure of the homesteading enterprise, especially in Montana where large land tracts promised better chances of success. But frontier survival depended on more than the mere physical presence of women. It required their active participation and a willingness to accept responsibility far beyond the dictates of the domestic focus of the cult of true womanhood. Most women on the Montana frontier accepted this task with enthusiasm, at the same time modifying the cult to emphasize its social over its domestic message.

The women of Montana may have adopted traditional roles, yet they also advanced their own cause as individuals by injecting a uniquely personal flavor into these roles and by developing a sense of what women could accomplish together. As author Helen Huntington Smith states, if she had to write the epitaph for women on the frontier it would
Homesteading started late in Montana. Thanks to the success of promotional enterprises of the railroads, the development of new farming techniques and the enactment, in 1909, of the Enlarged Homestead Act, developers of the Montana homestead frontier quickly made up for lost time. By 1910 agriculture exceeded mining in providing the main source of income for Montanans. Montana's homesteaders represented a diverse lot, sharing only the common characteristic of youth. Most were Native Americans; the 1920 census showed that only 17.1 percent of Montanans were foreign born. Most lived on farms and ranches scattered across Montana's huge expanses. Few of the state's settlers were women. According to the census, in 1870 Montana had eight men for every one woman. By 1910, only 39 percent of Montana's population was female. Even in the growing urban centers like Butte, Helena, and Missoula women were relatively rare.6

Women experienced the isolation of the frontier more than men. A lack of communication with other women reinforced the loneliness of the ranch and farmhouse. Agricultural historian Mary Hargreaves describes the migraine as the most recurrent complaint among frontier women, an illness brought on by the many fears and tensions
resulting from the isolated frontier environment. Among the more common fears Hargreaves lists blizzards, prairie fires, snakes, coyotes and wolves.\(^7\)

Work and isolation were dominant factors in the lives of frontier women. Nevertheless all of the essential ingredients for the development of a community spirit were present. According to Robert Hine's *Community on the American Frontier* these essential ingredients included a shared sense of place, a certain limited size, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of shared values.\(^8\)

Women on the frontier shared a sense of social mores which provided an important bonding agent among them. They wanted to participate in developing a community which would insure the survival of certain qualities—namely hard work, love of family, sobriety, and civility. As Annette Kolodny points out in *The Land Lay Before Her*, women's values were on a somewhat different plane than men's. Kolodny presents the idea of a "domestically informed community" as opposed to a "market economy oriented community" with which men would, generally, feel more comfortable. Kolodny contends that while men were busy extracting profits from the land, women were more apt to be found cultivating a garden, often a flower garden, so as to improve the esthetic nature of their surroundings. Supporting this argument, many
homestead accounts written by women describe the satisfaction they felt upon seeing planted flowers bloom. On the homestead, individuals maintained gardens for more than just vegetables. Jane Buck of Centennial Valley stubbornly planted a garden, even though "men didn't like women to plow for gardens -- all grass was for grazing." Later club activities would center around this idea of making the community appear clean, peaceful, ordered, and pretty.

The homesteading women of Montana joined together to advance their common interests of relieving isolation, educating themselves, and building a proper sort of society. Concerning the first order, relief from isolation involved contact with the outside world. Discussions of widely read periodicals like Harper's Weekly, Ladies Home Journal, Scribner's Monthly, Atlantic Monthly, Godey's Ladies Book, Saturday Evening Post, the Delineator and the American offered such contact. All of these publications, particularly Godey's, did their part in promoting the cult of true womanhood and so reinforced the two images of gentle tamer and sunbonnetted helpmate. Even though they frequently arrived weeks late, newspapers too were high on the list of entertainment.

For the most part, as homesteader Susia Huston
explained, "Montana homesteaders read a lot, traded information and helped each other. Passing books on was a common practice." Other examples of relief from isolation include the conveyance of vast amounts of valuable information simply through the act of conversing and the swapping of folk cures. Popular cures included a greased chest and a fried onion poultice for colds, sweet oil for earaches and steam for croup. Wavie Charlton of Camas Prairie used cow's cream for sore eyes, buttermilk and soda for poison ivy, and a tamarack syrup for coughs.

Information of this type was usually communicated during visits between farming frontier women, or by written correspondence. The Montana Women's Oral History Project reveals how women relied on each other for the latest information on birth control and child bearing. Without their willingness to convey knowledge, share trials and tribulations, to generally aid and comfort each other, many women would have ended up like Rolvaag's Beret in his novel Giants of the Earth. Her character represents the prototype of the depressed, homesick, and eventually insane frontier woman.

Relief from isolation also came in the form of community oriented activities such as barn dances, harvest parties, or holiday celebrations. Although these activities
included all members of the farming society, women played a central role. While men and children were eager participants in such activities it remained for women to organize and prepare the necessary food required for such gatherings. Holidays, especially the Fourth of July and Christmas, were "grand occasions" even though the environment made it impossible to have some of the traditional symbols. As Sue Howells recalled,"some children who live on the prairies are quite old before they ever even see a Christmas tree." On the treeless prairie, women invented their own holiday entertainment, to the delight of husbands and children. For example, many homestead mothers saved special foods for desserts on holiday occasions. One homesteader still remembered decades later the oranges her mother somehow obtained for Christmas.

Women's clubs, a national movement which spread to Montana around the turn of the century helped women fulfill their roles as wife, mother and homemaker, and at the same time provided a rare opportunity for women to educate and help themselves. Although some men perceived clubs as a threat, the club movement's emphasis on self-improvement served, it was felt by many members, as another way women could help their children to become better citizens.
Montana's first women's club, the Deer Lodge Women's Club founded in 1889, sought "individual growth and the direction of effort into lines of useful study." Generally, the club would assign a subject such as English literature as a program for one year. Following this pattern club members enjoyed discussions of history, art, music, and current events.

Though the Deer Lodge Club consisted primarily of prominent women, other clubs served the needs of less outstanding citizens. A young girl's club, the Avalea of Deer Lodge, consisted of seven young ladies who enjoyed an informal program with simple rules. According to Mrs. Christie, director of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, "the meetings are enlivened with a little music, a little embroidery, current topics and occasional demonstrations of scientific cooking."

Many clubs organized along the lines of Bozeman's State Housekeepers Society (1894) whose object was the practical study of more advanced methods of housekeeping and homemaking. According to Mrs. Christie, the club motto was "Our Kingdom is Our Home." Yet, even this type of club found itself involved in other matters. The Housekeepers Society, for example, collected and documented much of the early history of Montana, while at the same time the members
pursued interests in domestic science, literature and child culture.

One literary club serves to illustrate the urban Montana woman trying to fulfill her role according to the cult of true womanhood, while at the same time asserting her need for female companionship and personal development. The As You Like It Club of Missoula, founded in 1891 to promote intellectual, cultural, and social intercourse, held weekly meetings where papers, articles, and speeches were read. Among some of the topics considered were "Should Marriage Laws be Revised?", "Preservation of Good Temper in the Housekeeper" and an article entitled "The Unquiet Sex" which argued that "women take their clubs in a much more serious manner than men do, instead of being a place for recreation they are only another place for hard work."^21

The As You Like It Club promoted Missoula's first Fourth of July celebration and took an active part in planting trees on the University grounds. The women pursued literary activities along with the subjects of history, health, travel, philosophy, and suffrage. Literary clubs of this nature also helped women gain confidence by encouraging them to research, write, and present papers. Many literary societies fostered the first libraries in a community because they found research facilities sorely lacking."^22 In
rural Conrad, for example, homesteader Dorothy Floerschinger remembers the Conrad Women's Club founded the local library and organized holiday celebrations and flower shows. In the rural areas of Baker, Stevensville, Red Lodge, and Laurel a similar pattern emerged. Local literary societies began small lending libraries which eventually evolved into town libraries with books provided by donations and contributions from local citizens. These libraries fulfilled the dual purpose of allowing women an opportunity to grow intellectually and to preserve and promote morality more effectively, again emphasizing the socially active, outer directed message of the cult of domesticity.

With the initial success of literary clubs and sewing circles, national, state, and local club leaders moved their groups toward a more practical, urban oriented program--civic improvement. The Augusta Civic Society, for example, promoted the implementation of street lights, a bandstand, sidewalks, cemetery gates, public welfare, community sanitation, wholesome public entertainment, support and protection of schools and "all educational facilities in our midst." The women of Augusta took their role of guardian of morality seriously. Along with the improvement of themselves and their families, the ladies of Augusta were determined to have their community symbolize the order, morality, and civility which society had taught
them to appreciate.

Other urban communities developed similar women's clubs. In Helena, for instance, a Current Topics club organized in 1892. The primary purpose of this club, according to Mrs. Christie was "the cultivation of literary tastes, the acquisition of knowledge and the general improvement of its members to the highest degree." In 1898, Helena women organized an Improvement Society to facilitate keeping streets and sidewalks clean, improve school grounds, trim and prevent the destruction of trees, and to promote a foot path up Mount Helen. Montana club women sought the fulfillment of the gentle tamer role while at the same time accumulating a shared body of knowledge with which to improve their own self-confidence. Eventually these and similar organizations provided members for such major reform movements and the temperance and suffrage campaigns.

Adding strength to the argument of women as cultivators of esthetic surroundings, the Helena Improvement Society sponsored flower plantings by local schoolchildren. Along with these activities the society organized picnics, dances, plays and established a city park system. Accordingly the society objected to cows wandering on school grounds and the congregation of boys around the public library.
striving to make Helena an ideal city, women in the Improvement Society (which also had male members) followed the principles of the cult of true womanhood while at the same time expressing their individual need for active involvement in community affairs. Gradually women in Montana moved away from narrowly defined roles to experience a new sense of sisterhood.

In a letter to the editor of the Helena Independent in 1905, H.L. Glenn wrote:

"It is safe to say that in no town in the United States are the women more alive and interested in civic improvement than in Helena. It is equally safe to say that if the women of Helena had control of municipal affairs for one month the streets and vacant lots of this town would be in much better condition than they are at present."  

The gentle tamer role drew respectful acknowledgment from the women of Helena and Augusta, but more importantly, as women banded together to forward these roles they developed a sense of their own importance. Not only did they improve themselves, and their communities, women also aided other women as well.

The center of activity for women's clubs in Montana was the Butte urban area. According to Mrs. Christie, five clubs were "thoroughly organized", with no two being alike in plan. The Homer Club, the Atlas Club, Woman's Club of Butte, West Side Shakespeare and the Ethical Culture Club,
found home in Butte, not to mention the Ladies Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Daughters of Erin. Three of these clubs belonged to the general federation and, according to Mrs. Christie all were "interested in practical work tending to improve the social, educational, and moral conditions of the community." As one proof, Mrs. Christie recalled that art in the public schools was introduced through the women's club influence.

Butte women's clubs were not discriminatory, though certain clubs catered to a specific type of membership. There was, for example, the Ethical Culture Club which Mrs. Christie described as consisting of hardworking, single women of Butte who realized that "insurmountable obstacles" stood in the way of women's successes in the business world and decided to overcome them if possible through the organization of the Ethical Culture Club. Members of this club drew no class lines and "a feeling of helpfulness predominates." It seems women furthered their own interests as well. These early associations gave women a feeling of strength in numbers and promoted unity with regard to converting the frontier into a domestically informed society. Montana's club women began to experience a sense of power.

Many clubs, like the Daughters of Erin, provided for
widows within the club. They also attended to the funeral arrangements of departed members. Other organizations such as the Helena Ladies Relief Committee (1887-1893), responded to calls from city officials for "ladies to solicit contributions of food, clothing, and funds for those less fortunate citizens of Helena." This club provided wood, rent, groceries, bedding, medicine, baby clothes, and shoes for needy families as well as railroad tickets to travel back east for those wanting them. The Relief Committee presented a memorial to the legislature explaining the need for a home for destitute children and a reformatory school for the "neglected children of our cities who are growing up in ignorance and crime."

But perhaps the most important functions for relief committees such as these, were the help they provided specifically for women. In an age before crisis centers, battered women's shelters, and day care homes, women on the homestead frontier often found aid in benevolent societies. Minutes of the Helena Relief Committee show that requests were frequently made on behalf of women seeking employment. The committee worked to help young widows and women who had been deserted by their men, the so called "lords of creation." Furthermore, the committee eased the minds of poverty stricken mothers by paying the funeral
bills of dead children. Altogether, over a one year period the committee aided 1000 people in one way or another. No doubt these organizations relieved some of the worries of Montana women.

As cities and communities developed and prospered women turned to elements of society they saw as corrupting the ideal city or town atmosphere. First they attacked the saloons. In 1883 the Montana chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union organized. This group of 13 local unions and ten departments hoped to fulfill the gentle tamer role by ridding the frontier of drunken disorderliness. Through means of public education, social pressure and reform legislation, the WCTU sought dry state status for Montana. Eventually organizers of the WCTU (by 1916, 4,167 active members in 202 local unions) joined forces with the suffrage movement in order to bring about their desired goals. Both movements showed the growing sense of social and political strength that women on the Montana homestead frontier experienced in the wake of active club participation in social and civic affairs. Clearly, the club woman's emphasis on the social implication of the cult of true womanhood had taken her a step beyond the boundaries of traditional roles. Having found her voice, she would not stop using it until she had been heard.
Throughout the history of the Montana frontier, women and women's groups worked towards the achievement of a domestically informed community. Individual woman to woman relationships allowed for the communication of certain fundamental kinds of information regarding social values and standards, health, food production, and employment opportunities. These relationships found expression in holiday celebrations and other forms of community entertainment. As associations began to develop on the Montana frontier, women extended their social influence. Women's involvement in literary clubs helped the community by establishing libraries, benevolent organizations, and civic improvement associations. Further expansion of women's social influence is documented by the activities of relief committees and civic improvement societies which worked not only for the development of the ideal city in terms of appearance, but in terms of charity and compassion as well.

According to historian Sandra Myres, the participation of women in organizations and community activities, "allowed them to fulfill what they believed to be their civic and Christian duty to their family and community and at the same time gain a good deal of organizational and leadership experience." These experiences eventually found fruition in the activities of the WCTU and the various suffrage
organizations. In the meantime, the experiences proved valuable in allowing women to instruct each other, to develop their families and communities on certain well defined lines, and above all to enjoy a sense of comradery with other frontier women.

In studying the various relationships examined in this essay it becomes apparent that women on the farming frontier, while attempting to mold themselves to the gentle tamer role, actually defied such strict categorization. The women on the homestead frontier of Montana used their organizations as a means of expressing themselves. This access to self-expression enabled women to do more than develop a mere toleration for their environment. Instead of despising Montana for its rough climate and extreme isolation, many women learned to respect, appreciate, and love Montana. These women learned life in frontier Montana could be a source of pride and accomplishment. In a land previously viewed as unsuitable for human habitation, Montana women and their clubs "did the necessary" and more.

Montana represented a land of opportunity for women. It was a place where women could achieve expression of all that society had taught them to be and to develop new roles. It represented a land where women could join forces for the betterment of all; a land where women could take an
active role in civic affairs and experience pride in the changes they helped to promote.
NOTES


17. Cott, Nancy, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, p. 188.


19. Ibid., p. 581.

20. Ibid., p. 589.

21. "As You Like It Club Minutes," Manuscript Collection 89, Box 1, Mansfield Library, Missoula, Montana.


27. Ibid.


29. Ibid. p. 587.


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.
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Dissertations


Public Documents