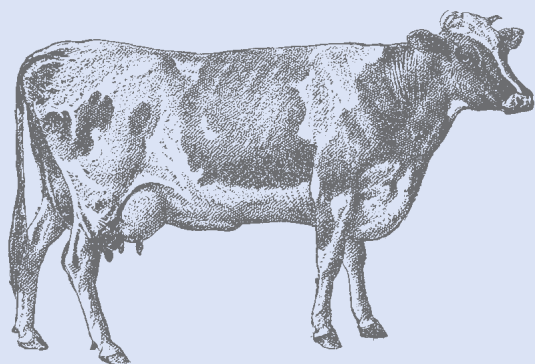
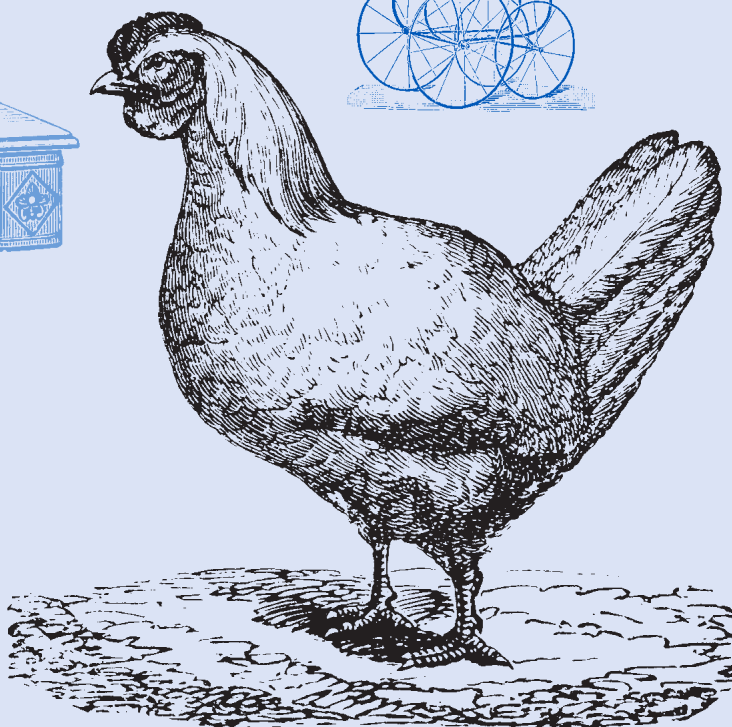
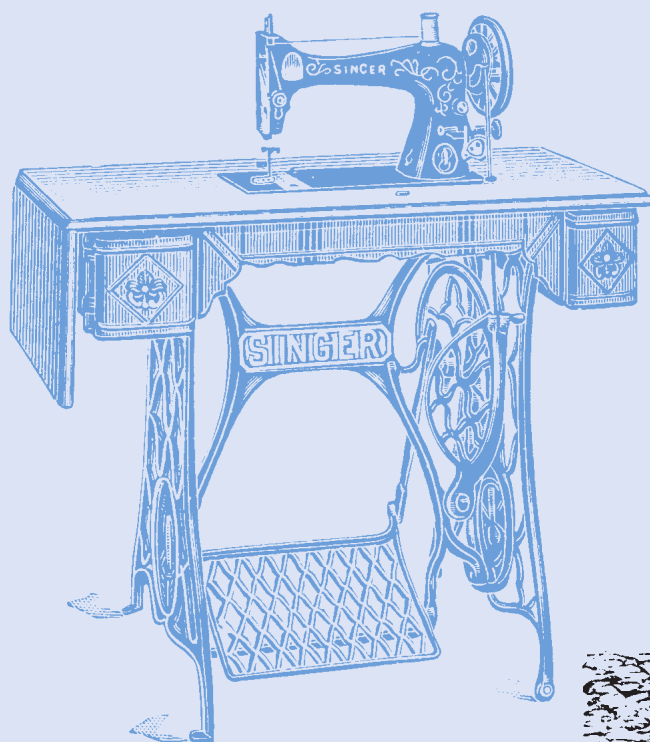


SURVIVING MONTANA



Women's Memories of Work
and Family Life, 1900–1960

by LAURIE MERCIER



WELL, I went to Devil's Lake and started to work there, and I met this man, that's my husband, and he was a railroader. But his folks lived in Fort Benton, and that's why he wanted to file on a homestead out here. But I didn't come out willingly; I sure wept. I didn't want to come out. I didn't know his people, and they had never met me, and I didn't know what I was getting into. And [we] had those two little kids . . . and I just bucked. You almost had to go where your husband goes, you know, so we came to Montana.

—IDA DUNTLEY

I WORKED at home. Oh heck, I washed by hand all those years . . . had to wash bedding and those boys' overalls . . . and Mama's clothes, and [she] never died until '30. And I kept house, there was a thirteen-room house, . . . and got the cows and milked the cows and made butter. Oh Christ, the butter that I made. I used to make about fourteen pounds of butter a week and then put them in prints or put them in jars, you know, and bring it to town and sell it. . . . I cleaned the horse barn, I cleaned the chicken coop, I sold eggs . . . and I fixed Mama's [sore] foot three, four times a day, went down to the garden, hoed the garden. That's my day, one day's work! . . . I stayed home seven years after [Mama] died, stayed home with Pa and Paul and Louie, and I done all the cooking and the washing and went up cooking for the shearers and cooking for the hayers and cooking for lambers.

—PAULINE LENZ DEBRAY

IN MY DAY all we can think about is being nurses or teachers. That was acceptable. And now, you know, you can do mostly anything and still be accepted. But yet there is still a lot of discrimination on women. . . . I might be educated and everything, but I'm still Indian. I'm still a minority and I'm still a woman. And it's really hard for me to be on the level of men. They won't accept me. Especially in Native American society because Native men are number one. . . . They are the master of the house, that's the Assiniboine tradition.

—MINERVA ALLEN¹



The choices available to Montana women have often been circumscribed by work opportunities, family needs, and community expectations. Nonetheless, they adapted to, or struggled against, gender restrictions in order to carve meaningful and sometimes autonomous lives. In oral history interviews collected by the Montana Historical Society in the 1980s, women described what it was like to be “survivors” in a challenging environment. Above, Pauline Lenz, one of the interviewees, and Cary Millman visit outside the cook shack of the MacMurray and Gordon Jamison sheep camp. MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAc 82-65.6

ORAL HISTORY interviews reveal hidden details about women's lives. Here women describe—in their own words—how they remember past relationships, work, gender roles, and feelings and beliefs that are missing from other sources. Oral reminiscences can change the way we understand the history of a place like Montana, which boasts an influential body of literature and lore emphasizing frontier independence, economic opportunities, and rugged landscapes and people. But women's words emphasize a different West, a place where half the population had lives shaped by men's decisions, caretaking responsibilities, limited economic options, discrimination, and family and community interdependence. Women's stories also reveal their agency in affecting both their lives and their remembered pasts.

This article explores some of the patterns and recurring themes that emerged in interviews with over sixty women collected by the Montana Historical Society (MHS) in the 1980s. During the past decade, in order to more fully understand how women described their lives in the first half of the twentieth century, I have listened more closely to the oral histories MHS produced some thirty years ago. Although these women came from different places and backgrounds, they still shared much generationally and in the stories they told. Most of the women were born between 1890 and 1920. They lived in rural, industrial, or reservation communities, and all struggled in different ways to support themselves and their families.² Location, class, race, ethnicity, marital status, and children affected these women in different ways, but gender—the socially and historically constructed roles for men and women—circumscribed each woman's work opportunities, family needs, community expectations, and social norms. Nonetheless, they adapted to, or struggled against, gender restrictions in order to carve meaningful and sometimes autonomous lives. They were “survivors” in a challenging environment. But unlike the contestants on television's longest-running

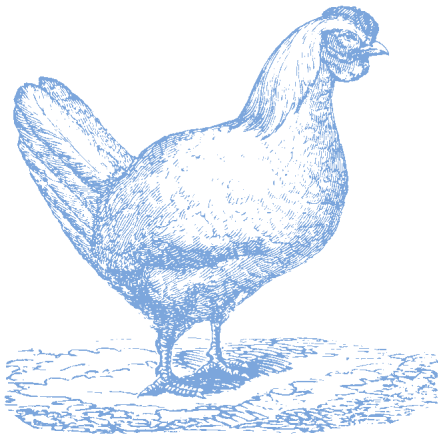


MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Pac 79-64.1

Most of the women interviewed were born between 1890 and 1920. They lived in rural, industrial, or reservation communities, and all struggled in different ways to support themselves and their families. Pictured above are Elinor (Mrs. Charles A.) Lawrence and her daughter Ada at the Eva May Mine near Basin. Elinor cooked and Ada waited table and washed dishes for 150 miners, a few of whom also posed for the photograph. Ada recalled that she was sixteen years old, her mother thirty-five, and that her mother “sure knew how to cook.”

reality show, Montana women framed their narratives, whether cheery or resigned, as a life of perseverance despite hardships, barriers, or trauma.

Despite the lack of economic opportunities, women with deep roots in their communities—from the windswept plains of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation to the gritty remains of industrial Anaconda—expressed no inclination to leave friends, kin, and places that emotionally bound them. Of course, their very rootedness made them available for interviews, and so the MHS oral history collection reflects a skewed sample of those who chose to remain. Even so, many of the women clearly articulated what made communities such as Eureka, Conrad, Plentywood, and the Crow Indian Reservation hold special meaning for them. American Indian women, whose families had been connected to particular places for many generations, suffered losses in the twentieth century but never questioned their belonging to the land. Women who arrived as immigrants and



migrants viewed their new homes as yielding either disappointment or opportunity. In many ways, the worlds of Indian and non-Indian women did not intersect, but in other ways, the overarching themes of survival, family, work, community-building, and the importance of place linked them together.

Place and community always occupy portions of the Montana women's narratives, but two other themes predominate.³ The first is material survival: how individual women endured adversities, had to make do, sacrificed, and sometimes triumphed over challenging economic odds. Stories of survival emerged prominently in these narratives, in part because of the framework of oral history projects and the paradigms of western women's history that guided questions at the time: "What were women doing? How did they meet the challenges they encountered? How did their lives differ from men's? Was the West 'liberating'?"⁴

The other dominant theme concerns intimate relations. Of course, relationships and material well-being are closely entwined. A woman's class, family, and race strongly influenced what choices might be available for her unfolding future. Then, partnerships—often the luck of the draw on whether a husband would be faithful, healthy, or productive—and children could determine a woman's material fate. But although 1980s women's historians wanted to know about sexuality, reproduction, and domestic violence, we were often hesitant to probe about such matters in our interviews. These subjects were more confidently investigated later by women's and gender studies scholars. Nonetheless, during the oral history interviews, narrators sometimes offered up private and painful recollections that illuminate women's

lives in ways that other historical records could not. Women often found themselves with limited options because of family ties and gender rules—they typically married, followed husbands, cared for parents or children, and searched for niches in the gendered division of labor. Rarely did they pursue same sex relationships or life as single women.

Oral history collections do not merely record and preserve people's reminiscences about now forgotten events and experiences, but they can also suggest other meanings and provide a glimpse of memory at specific points in time. Decades of thoughtful analysis of oral history have revealed that allegorical stories, silences, and performativity—the way someone relates a story—tell us as much about a person as the actual facts they remembered.⁵ Interviews represent snapshots of how people reconstruct the past and choose to translate their experience in light of various influences, including community pressures, the interviewer's social position and questions, and the tenor of the times. Reviewing these Montana interviews decades later, it is now clear to me how the period of the 1980s shaped how the interviewers and narrators interacted in reconstructing women's lives in the first half of the century. Many scholars insist that memory is socially produced—that people construct narratives out of their own cultural expectations and tell collective stories that embody a community perspective, focusing on the dreams, opinions, and fates of others, as much as their own experience. But, despite these social influences, these interviews are still individual voices—the voices of Montana women who reveal their agency in enduring, coping with, and challenging a world of limited choices.⁶

Making a Living

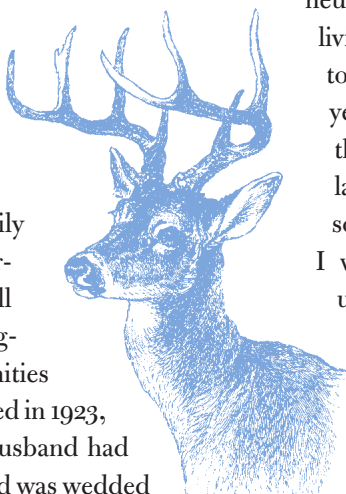
Montana women eloquently and enthusiastically described their work and told how they creatively pursued a variety of household tasks, jobs, and money-making ventures in order to survive or improve their families' lives. Montana and the Rocky Mountain West lacked the gender-specific manufacturing jobs, such as textile and food production, that provided unskilled wage work for some American women in the East. Montana's leading industries—mining, forest products, and agriculture—were famously, and exclusively, masculine. So women carved out support work



Some women found wage work in “women’s” jobs in restaurants, homes, offices, and schools. Cook Charlotte Bachman and an unidentified servant were two who labored in a home. They pose here with the Alfred Smith children, Whitney and Charlotte, in front of the Smith residence at 618 Madison Avenue in Helena circa 1910.

that combined ways to create income with caretaking the family—such as taking in boarders or laundry or selling butter and eggs—or they joined with husbands or other family members in enterprise, even if their labor was unrecognized. Some found wage work in “women’s” jobs in restaurants, homes, offices, and schools. Despite persistent stereotypes of women as the “weaker” sex, the oral histories underscore how women often had to turn their bodies to hard, physical labor and also manage the “double day,” which required continued evening labor at home, when men had retired from their work day.

In the early twentieth century, women often moved back and forth between rural communities and towns, trying to make a living in different environments and responding to opportunities and family needs. These internal migrations characterized life for many. Even after mill and farm closures, families often doggedly hung on to remain near communities and kin. When the Eureka sawmill closed in 1923, Clara Fewkes said she and her new husband had few economic options. Yet, her husband was wedded



to place—“He would not move anywhere else.” The couple bought a small farm on the west side of the Kootenai River, a place where “we could raise our food . . . and had a roof over our heads,” a house built from logs they cut on their land. “We had to do something for a living because it wasn’t possible in Eureka to start up anything.” Clara boarded the teacher and began to raise and sell chickens, which ultimately earned more than her husband’s cattle raising enterprise. She found raising chickens “fascinating work” and kept abreast of the latest methods by writing to agricultural colleges, where she “got their directions for all kinds of stuff.” Clara and her husband ran an egg route in Rexford and then shipped the balance of fresh eggs to restaurants in Seattle.⁷

In addition to grappling with external economic and natural forces, such as mill or mine closures, droughts, and depressions that tested Montana families in the first half of the twentieth century, women described how a sudden illness or accident could wreak havoc on family economies. When Clara Fewkes’s husband developed heart trouble, the couple had to find less strenuous labor to subsist. She cut and sold rocks, then enlisted her children’s help to find antlers, which her husband could carve into souvenirs to sell in area shops. Always entrepreneurial and searching for ways to make a living off the land, Clara even found a way to profit from pesky insects: “The last year we were on the ranch . . . we sprayed the cattle for ticks. [My husband] hadn’t laughed for a long time because he was so sick with heart trouble, and I thought I would make him laugh so I picked up some of the dead ticks and I said, ‘What a shame it would be to not do something with them.’” With some advice from Dr. Knowles at the Rocky Mountain Laboratory in Hamilton, Clara said she “sat down

and wrote to the laboratory in Rochester and told them I could provide them with all the wood ticks they needed. . . . I had an order from Rochester for three thousand. . . . The next day we went out prepared, and we got over five hundred. . . . It was just



a matter of hours to fill that tick order. And I had the right tick. I even knew the proper name for them and everything else, from Dr. Knowles's letter. A few days later we got a check for \$240 for wood ticks. Well, you know, this was pretty easy money. Then they wrote to me and they wanted chicken lice." Women took pride in these unconventional enterprises, especially when an initiative of their own made them a successful breadwinner.⁸

Some women pursued these ventures in spite of their husbands' objections. Lydia Keating went into the sheep business even though her husband "hated sheep" and would not assist with feeding or lambing.⁹ And Edna McCann of Trout Creek used her own money from milking cows to file mining claims, nearby in the Cabinet Mountains, without her husband's support. She occasionally hired a neighbor to babysit while she went off prospecting for the day.¹⁰

Although women may have enjoyed extra income from goods they produced or services they provided, their wage options were limited and almost certainly paid less than men's jobs, even if the work was just as demanding. Concepción Bengochea worked long hours cooking and cleaning for big crews on the Etchart sheep ranch in Valley County, and she noted that at thirty-five dollars a month, her wages were half what men's were. But when asked how she felt about the disparity, Concepción reconciled the pay difference by noting that she was able to board her family: "I don't know. . . . They got quite a big advantage with us because we had the kids there too, so I suppose they count everything. Like I said, we didn't have to pay for the house."¹¹

Domestic work was the leading occupation for women in the early twentieth century, yet women sought other jobs whenever possible to improve their wages. Unless their labor was critical to family farms or they married a farmer, young women in rural Montana often "went out to work" for more prosperous ranchers and farmers. Anna Juvan earned twenty dollars a month for many years, working as a

domestic in the Paradise Valley, until she landed a job at Martin's Café in Livingston, where frequent train stops kept the beanery busy. "They used to come from all over the world and seemed like a lot of railroad people came in there. They'd just flock in there at a meal time. The train would stop, you know, and they'd all come in there and eat. Well, I helped with the cooking and the cleaning and stuff like that. It was challenging, I thought." In describing her schedule, she noted, "I don't think we had hours them days. We just worked until we got done, from morning 'til night."¹²

Because of widespread discrimination, African American women had few occupational choices other than domestic work. Although she received secretarial training at Butte Business College, Lena Brown Slauson left Butte in the mid-1930s to work for a wealthy family in Cut Bank, then returned in 1942 to care for her ill mother. Lena worked the next four



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAc 2008-108.7

Edna McCann of Trout Creek used her own money from milking cows to file mining claims in the nearby Cabinet Mountains without her husband's support. She occasionally hired a neighbor to babysit while she went off prospecting for the day.



Although women may have enjoyed extra income from goods they produced or services they provided, their wage options were limited and almost certainly paid less than men's jobs, even if the work was just as demanding. Pauline and Annie Lenz, shown relaxing above at the cook wagon in 1917, cooked for threshing crews.

decades as a housekeeper and cook for the families of a local physician and a lawyer for the Montana Power Company. As the key domestic employee for elite families, she “met people from all over; it was very interesting.” As she recalled, “Quite a few [black women] worked [in Butte] as domestic cooks. . . . And then a lot of the ladies, older people, in order to make a living, they did a lot of janitor work, cleaning up, or house cleaning for a day’s work.”¹³

Native American women often had to leave their reservation homes in order to find work, but they were pulled back periodically by family responsibilities. Florence McDonald Smith found occasional domestic or sewing work for homesteaders in the Flathead Valley, and in fall, she picked apples in the Bitterroot. In 1916, at age twenty-one, Smith traveled with an

acquaintance to California to look for work. She found a job “hashing” in a busy cotton town café on the Colorado River and quickly adjusted to a challenging new culture. When someone stole her pocketbook, she was told, “You’re not on the



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Pac 2008-108 roll 1.0A

American Indian women, who often had to leave their reservation homes in order to find work, were pulled back periodically by family responsibilities. Florence McDonald Smith (right) became “a full-fledged restaurant woman,” working in California until she returned to the Flathead Reservation to care for her parents. There she got hired as a cook for Civilian Conservation Corps camps, where she worked until World War II closed the camps.



reservation now; you got to watch your stuff.” After two decades in California, where she became “a full-fledged restaurant woman,” Smith returned to the Flathead Indian Reservation to care for her parents. “I didn’t stay around here very much after I went away. . . . I’d probably stay six months . . . but I’d always go back to [California] for a job. There was no jobs around here. There was nothing here on the reservation. Towns were small, and the people that were there had to live and die, I guess, on their jobs, you know.”¹⁴

Smith’s experience reflects how many women found ways to juggle work and family commitments. After returning to Montana in the late 1930s, her cousin Archie, who was cooking for a hundred men on an Indian Civilian Conservation Corps camp, invited her to visit. She thought: “I was amused by the way everything was working and the way they were handling things, and I just knew that if I could just get in there I could help a lot. So I said to Archie, ‘Gee, I’d sure like to work in here with you guys.’ And he said, ‘Why don’t you try. There’s no women working, but then maybe if you try, you can get on.’” Smith cooked for the camps for six years, until World War II closed

them. Although she paved the way for other female camp cooks to be hired, she was not paid the same wages as a male cook. “I was the first cook, but I was never paid for first cook. . . . They said they couldn’t give that first job to a woman; it was a man’s job. I think it was baloney, but anyway I went on cooking. That was the only job I knew around the reservation, and my mother was sick. Way we worked it, we would work twenty days in camp and take ten days at home, so that helped a lot when I get home.”¹⁵

Despite the gendered division of labor and lower pay, women often performed “men’s” jobs. Daughters learned early on the appropriate roles for girls and women, but the demands of the rural economy often meant they were treated like male “hands.” Verna Carlson recalled that she “rode when we had to chase livestock away or anything like that. . . . I’d ride and go along with the men when they mined coal. I had to pitch in and help on anything like that where I could. I didn’t actually work in the field until after I was married because we didn’t have a big enough outfit or boys at home to do outside work, you know.”¹⁶

Mining was entirely a male-dominated occupation, but a few women, who typically worked with their husbands in small rather than capitalized mines, worked underground. In the mid-1920s, when their economic

options were few, Rose Larson and her husband opened a coal mine near Roundup. The work was hard, and the young couple barely eked out a living from selling to area farmers,

who often filled their trucks with coal after delivering produce to Roundup. Larson recalled that her labor was as strenuous as her husband’s in this collaborative venture:

I loaded the coal on the cars, and . . . we pushed it so far, then we got another car and loaded it up and cleaned that place up. . . . Then when we got all our coal loaded, we



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAc 2008-108.4

Rose Larson mined coal with her husband at their small mine near Roundup. She described the labor as strenuous and noted that they would “put the kids to bed, and then we’d go back in the mines. . . . Yeah, kind of tough going.”

had a horse, like a station down there, and we hooked that cart to that there horse, and we put it up on the surface to the dump and dump the coal out. Trucks would come, and you would scale your truck, and then you would put it under the chute and give them their grade of coal, whether they wanted nut coal, pea coal, or lump coal. . . . After we got all through cleaning that room up, then . . . he'd set the drills for me, and I would drill the hole so we could shoot it with dynamite, so we could make more coal for the next day. And that was every day. And lots of times we would put the kids to bed, and then we'd go back in the mines. . . . Yeah, kind of tough going.¹⁷

To supplement their meager coal income, the couple helped a farmer near the Yellowstone River with his onion and potato harvests, trading their labor for food. "We dug all the potatoes [and onions] up for him . . . and stuff like that, and then we would get everything we needed for our winter use. We went there Friday night and stayed there Saturday and worked Sunday. And Sunday night we would go home, and the next day we'd have to pump water from the mine and so we pumped the water. Then we'd come back [to the farm], and then we'd stay two, three days [again]."¹⁸

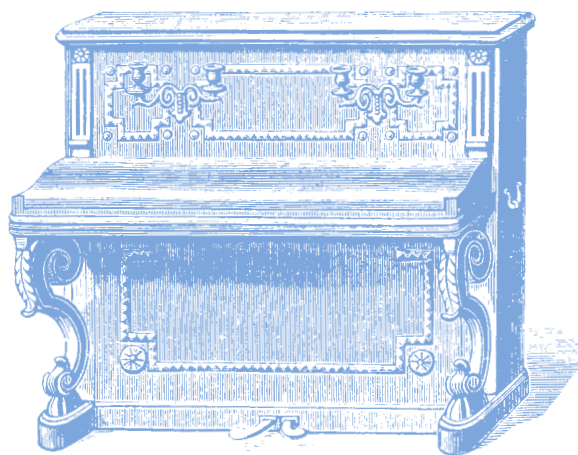
Because Rose dressed "manly," with "a white cap and a lamp, a dirty face, glasses, shirt, my overalls like the men did and a belt across me," people often did not recognize that she was a woman. The mine inspector, who had visited for five years, only learned of her gender when her children approached her as "Mama." But Rose was familiar with at least one other woman who worked with her husband in another mine. She noted that women simply took whatever job they could at the highest wages: "One year all the women quit working in town [Bridger]; they went on the beet wagon because it was good wages then, fifteen dollars a day."¹⁹

The gender distinctions of work that made Larson's mining unusual also defined the enterprises in which women could engage throughout Montana, usually jobs serving men in resource and construction industries. Boomtowns, like those surrounding Fort Peck during the 1930s, operated under this standard

gender division of labor. Noreen Romig Brown did not recall any women working on the dam project. Instead, she remembered:

It was a Depression, and these were the only jobs I believe in the whole state, so it was just a terrible influx of young men. . . . You know, there wouldn't be too many jobs out there for women—telephone operating and waiting table and at the theatre . . . and some women working in the Buttery's, I suppose, the dress shop. But most of it was geared for men; the dam work was all men. . . . And so they hired these young girls. [They] would go out and work in these dance halls, and they would get ten cents a dance. Boys would have to give them a dime. And that's the way they made their living. . . . The boys would come in and the boys had the money, they had the jobs.²⁰

Vocational training did not assure women of a job, and often even talent, luck, and family or union connections barely budged open hiring doors. Grace Hardcastle Cunningham realized that opportunities were few for young women in the bustling mining city of Butte, where skilled work below and above ground was reserved for men. In high school, she studied business and aimed to find office work. But her talents as a pianist finally landed her a job with the People's Theatre, accompanying the many silent films that entertained residents during the 1920s. "I joined the Musician's Union and was steadily employed for the next five years when sound pictures came in. . . . I just sat down and played the picture cold. I hadn't seen it before, but that's what you had to do. . . . I



think anybody automatically knows when they see a film if it's a tragedy or sad or you just know that emotion exists there, and you try to match the music with the emotion." This was demanding work, but Cunningham loved music, the films, and the theatre. In addition to the intrinsic rewards, she realized that she was lucky to have a job that paid well "for a girl." Women often highlighted that distinction of doing well in spite of gendered limitations. For Cunningham, this kind of prized, unionized employment was "kind of a thrill. I was always happy doing it, and I enjoyed all the pictures while I was playing to them. . . . I enjoyed them as much as the audience did." Sound pictures, the Depression, and her marriage to John Cunningham in 1931 ended her silent film career.²¹

Although job options were few in male-dominated industrial towns like Butte and Anaconda, women workers won job benefits and protections with the help of male unions that supported their organizing efforts. In 1955, the Anaconda Restaurant Workers Local 509 led a successful strike that gained a dollar-

a-day increase in wages as well as establishing some benefits. Alice Shepka attributed the women's success in the seven-week strike to their determination: "There was some good fighters in those days, you know. The women banded together and they stuck together."²² Katie Dewing noted that community support for their pickets was also key: "You could go in [the cafés] to eat, but it was worth your life to go through that picket line, because then you were labeled as a union buster!"²³

Union jobs or professional training provided women with opportunities to join the middle class. Teaching was a desirable occupation for many young women, who faced few working alternatives because of their gender, but the cost of preparation to become a schoolteacher was out of reach for many Montanans. Dorothy Floerchinger desperately wanted to attend high school, but her family lived too far from town. Several people came to her aid to help her realize her dream to teach and to attain the education that she embraced throughout her life. Although, as Dorothy said, "it hurt my parents' pride," they



Alta Deem, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAC 2009-49-23

Eva Deem taught in this fourteen-by-fourteen-foot sod-roofed homestead shack that she paid for with the money earned from the subscription school. Hers was the first school in the Big Sandy area, pictured here in 1914.



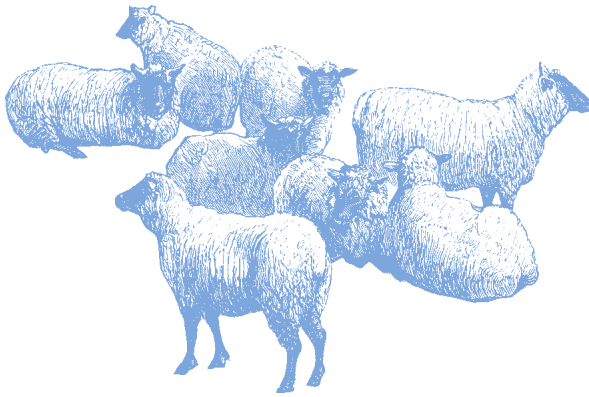
Courtesy the author

borrowed money and sent her for one year to the Ursuline Academy in Great Falls, “for which I am forever grateful because Sister Anunciata brought out the beauty and goodness of literatures, which has really enriched my life and gave me a hunger to know that I’ve never lost.” Then, she was able to work for room and board to finish high school in Conrad. She graduated in 1920, shortly after Pondera County was created, and a shortage of teachers prompted the new superintendent to petition “the state superintendent May Trumper for a special permit for me and another one of my classmates to teach that year, and she granted it because of the shortage. And the next summer I did go to normal school. And so these were some of the people that really made it possible for me to do many of the things that I went on to enrich my life.” Her father had initially protested spending “money to send me a girl to school ’cause he said, ‘Why waste it, she’ll only marry a farmer anyway.’ And I did, but I’d sure like to tell him that once I sang in Carnegie Hall, me and a thousand others, because I was a delegate to the national Farmer’s Union [convention] in New York.”²⁴

Many women like Loretta and Lillian Jarussi began their teaching careers in the country, where requirements were less demanding, and “gradually qualified to come in [to town].” But in order to retain their hard-won careers, the Jarussi sisters had to remain single, since until the 1940s and 1950s, many Montana schools would not hire married women. Loretta explained school policies: “We did have a lot of boyfriends; we had a lot of good times. But I guess we were devoted to teaching and didn’t put too much emphasis on getting married. . . . ‘Marriage of a lady teacher terminates this contract within thirty days.’ You couldn’t get married and teach. And we needed the job, so I guess we just passed it up.”

As the oldest in an Italian immigrant family of ten children, Loretta Jarussi remembered that she had her “mind made up to be a teacher, but with that many kids there wasn’t that much money.” Fortunately, when she graduated from high school, her father “got the bug” to homestead and moved the family from Red Lodge to Whitebird Creek south of Columbus. Loretta approached Stillwater County superintendent Gertrude Sylvester and told her she would like to teach, and the superintendent recommended that she attend a training school near East Rosebud, run by Rosa Dell and Minnie Burton, two Billings teachers. After taking the training and passing a certification test, as Loretta explained: “That certificate was good for two years. So I could teach in the rural schools.” Many women like Loretta and her sister Lillian began their teaching careers in the country, where requirements were less demanding, and “gradually qualified to come in [to town].”²⁵

But in order to retain their hard-won careers, the Jarussi sisters had to remain single, since until the 1940s and 1950s, many Montana schools would not hire married women.²⁶ Family and friends often inquired why they remained “spinsters,” and Loretta explained: “We did have a lot of boyfriends; we had a lot of good times. But I guess we were devoted to teaching and didn’t put too much emphasis on getting married. . . . ‘Marriage of a lady teacher terminates this contract within thirty days.’ You couldn’t get married and teach. And we needed the job, so I guess we just passed it up. People don’t believe that, but it isn’t too many years ago that that contract term was still in it.”²⁷ In navigating gender restrictions, the Jarussis and other women often had to choose between work and having a family. In other cases, family decisions governed what work women would find available.



Maintaining Family

When asked to recount their lives, women, like men, usually chose to foreground the public aspects of their lives, describing in detail their daily and seasonal work demands. The Montana female narrators had especially vivid memories of childhood, when they had freedom to roam, observe, and participate in the public sphere before marriage, and of their wage and income-producing work, whether before, during, or after marriage. The interviewer usually had to probe to elicit reflections about their private lives—relationships, caretaking, and reproduction. Explaining that they had been “so busy” while raising children and engaged in household production, the women often had difficulties remembering other details of their daily lives.

Intimate relationships brought and kept non-Indian women in Montana, and husbands and children helped solidify their connections to place. Immigrant women, in particular, faced many adjustments—far from home and family. Tony Bengochea returned to the Basque region of France where there were “lots of young girls” to marry, and in 1934 he came back to his job at a northeastern Montana sheep ranch with his wife Concepción. She stayed with her employer, Mrs. Etchart, until her first baby was born, but then immediately joined her husband at a sheep camp:

After the baby come, we back again to the country . . . no neighbors, no cars, nothing there, no wire in the house, no lights. . . . All winter with tiny baby, [and] like I say, nobody else. Tony and another guy and . . . when they went out, I was alone there, and that’s the only thing I feel sorry in this

country is staying alone in the night. . . . But after a while . . . I liked the winter fine and everything’s alright, and then another one come again a year later. That was the boy in December. So I was busy, yeah. Before one started walking, I had the other one, so . . . it stayed like that a few years until schooling and stuff. So then I moved to Tampico to the [Etchart] ranch, and I cook for Mrs. Etchart for seven years, and then in ’47 we bought this place.²⁸

Women often described their reproductive and wage work as interconnected, even when one interrupted the other. Thelma Bondy said she worked in the Casa de Costa restaurant when Fort Peck Dam added a second powerhouse in 1949. “Then they closed the dining room then when fall come, and they finished up their work pretty much. And then I worked up at the café. Then I didn’t work for a year or two when I had Deanna and Dwayne. Then I went back to work down at the café again. Waited tables



While cooking, waitressing, cleaning, and other domestic chores often dominated a woman’s lot at home and work, her children shaped her life options. Women’s days were consumed by caretaking—working hard to put food on the table and clothes on their children. Above, Gertrude Carey Cornelius washes dishes in the kitchen of the Cornelian Hotel in Alzada circa 1920.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Pdc 83-97.13

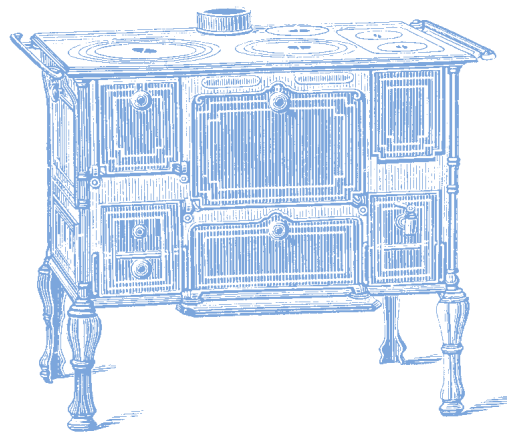
for a while, then I cooked. And then I quit. Then I went to work in the grocery store for eleven years. . . . Jackie Schoenfelder had the store. She wanted to know if I could help her out for a few days till she found someone.”²⁹

Children are central in women’s narratives, yet it is somewhat surprising how they are described. Although women stressed their critical work and family roles as children in their parents’ lives, they seldom discussed details about their own children, except in terms of noting how caretaking responsibilities shaped their life options and remembering events based on children’s ages. For example, when I asked Anna Juvan about the approximate date when a hard freeze brought hardship on her Paradise Valley ranch, she responded: “Yeah, it was in ’56 ’cause [my grandson] was just a baby and he was born in ’56. That’s how I know.”³⁰ Memories were staked to children, but the children themselves remain as backdrops, rarely fleshed out with lives and personalities of their own, with both the interviewer and narrator focused on the woman’s life. Women’s days were so consumed by caretaking—moving back and forth from farm to town to meet schooling demands or working hard to put food on the table and clothes on their children—that they had little time to observe their daily activities. Yet, at the end of an interview, in reconciling lives full of struggle in the first half of the twentieth century, women often celebrated the achievements and successes of offspring. And they invariably provided a guided tour of the framed photographs detailing their children’s and grandchildren’s recent lives that crowded walls and other spaces in their modest homes.

Women’s stories contest persistent idealized assumptions about families and gender roles. Despite what one may expect, women often did not talk about husbands until prompted by an interviewer. This tendency may have arisen from their desire to re-create their lives with themselves at the center of their histories as much as it reflected lives separated by gendered labor and social spaces. Of course, by the time I interviewed many of these women, they had been widowed or divorced and living alone, with time to think about their past from this perspective. The narrators clearly connected their lives to children and husbands, but they also spoke about the autonomy they tried to create. The women often claimed

their independence because of absent or ineffective husbands, or they asserted their expectations for egalitarian relationships. At other times, women revealed some resentment or ambivalence toward husbands, feelings that complicate many idealized western stories of women as partners.

Jewell Wolk spoke bluntly about the less romantic factors in many Montana marriages: convenience and necessity. “There were darn few marriages of love out here among these early beginners. . . . A man just couldn’t work out in the field all day and then come in and start the beans boiling. It didn’t work.



. . . You realize that washing clothes was almost a two-day operation in the wintertime. . . . Just running the household was a full-time job, so you went out looking for a woman and you went out fast. . . . I don’t think I’ve ever heard a homestead wife tell how much she loved her husband. That wasn’t part of it; it was survival.”³¹

Some women chose to highlight how they asserted their independence and self-sufficiency despite social expectations about gender roles. Their insistence at maintaining egalitarian marriages illustrated this, as Helen Raymond explains: “I didn’t think about it much then; it was just up to me to go to work. And I was never discriminated against much, and the men I married were people I got along with pretty good. And I didn’t feel like I was taking second place. I remember when I was married to my first husband, we went hunting or anything and I was always in the gang with him. And I was part of everything.”³²

This assertiveness is echoed by Lula Martínez, who compared her attitudes “then” to the contemporary feminist movement: “I’ve always been [for women’s rights] but I didn’t even know it. And I



Many Montana marriages were based on convenience and necessity. "There were darn few marriages of love out here among these early beginners. . . . A man just couldn't work out in the field all day and then come in and start the beans boiling. It didn't work," observed Jewell Wolk. "Just running the household was a full-time job, so you went out looking for a woman and you went out fast. . . . I don't think I've ever heard a homestead wife tell how much she loved her husband. That wasn't part of it; it was survival." Ruby Goodell's husband Homer T. rigged an engine to the old-fashioned washer to make her wash day chores go faster. They posed at their Philbrook home in the Judith Basin circa 1900.

think you will find the majority of women are, but they don't know because they've never really knew what [feminism] was. . . . I had a good understanding with my first husband. And my second time when I got married, I just laid it on the line the same way, you know, and we got along fine, really good. . . . I think as far as marriage is concerned, I think it's great, but I think that a complete understanding beforehand is due. Because I'm this way and I'm not going to change for nobody because I'm me."³³

In their narratives, Raymond and Martínez downplayed the role of their husbands in their lives, even as they insisted on their roles as equal partners and identities as individuals. They hinted that they could

survive on their own without husbands, even if they did enjoy male companionship as witnessed by their choices to marry again.

These individual oral histories, then, not only reflect the fact that men and women led separate, gendered lives, but also become part of the collective stories from women that indicate their modes of resistance, even in the face of limited power and economic opportunities. In the process of telling their stories, the women seemed empowered, or at least emboldened, to share thoughts and feelings they may have had in the past but had not expressed. Or perhaps they were reinterpreting the past in light of new insights applied to revisiting older memories.

Women's silences about intimate relationships may also reveal an effort to keep private or hidden a painful past. The fact that a significant number of the Montana women interviewed were on their own—from desertion, or what was legally called “malicious abandonment,” or separation—but never formally divorced, may also explain silence, resentment, or ambivalence toward relationships. Listening to the oral history collection leads us to this realization; one cannot often find evidence of desertion in other records.³⁴ Some women had married several times, and still others casually acknowledged an early marriage as a “kid” marriage, glossing over it as if it didn't count, but needing to mention it to explain the presence of children or complete the chronology of their lives.

The glossing over or avoidance of stories is as compelling as the actual details revealed. How would these women explain parts of their lives that had remained hidden from, or forgotten by, their families and communities? Ordinarily people will recount their lives in rehearsed “conversational narratives,” which are frequently judged by family, friends, and community, as they reshape their memories. But in many cases here, until the interviews these Montana women had not told their stories—had even avoided them—or they told them in new ways when prompted by an interviewer's questions.³⁵

As recollections bump up against social conventions, many narrators struggle with how to explain their lives within a perceived framework of acceptability. For example, Ida Duntley met and married a railroader in Minot, North Dakota, then moved west to the Fort Benton area, where his family lived and where they could take up a homestead. But soon, Duntley's husband deserted her, leaving her with two young children and expecting a third. This is how she described the incident when I asked about her first year on the homestead that she acquired: “Well, I don't know what to say. I hate to tell you this . . . but my husband left, pulled out, and he never went out there, so the little kids and I went out there by ourselves. And that was tough going all those years I was out there.” Somewhat embarrassed and still saddened by the painful abandonment so many years later, Duntley hesitated to explain the event, but she knew it was essential to understanding her choices and the hard life that followed as a single parent. I then asked



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Plc 2008-108 roll 1.8

Gender determined choices, opportunities, and family circumstances, whether in marriage, divorce, or desertion. When Ida Duntley's husband deserted her and their children, she stayed on the homestead, explaining, “I didn't want to give it up. I had nothing, you know, . . . and I stayed out there.” She described working hard to raise children and grandchildren and, through sheer determination, ensuring that they received education and vocational training.

why she decided to remain on the homestead: “Well, you have it, and I didn't want to give it up. I had nothing, you know, . . . and I stayed out there. And then when I got it proved up, I had to borrow, borrow, borrow all the time . . . on the homestead to pay off all my debts. And I'm off the homestead. . . . That's how I lost it. . . . Wasn't that beautiful? . . . And alone and going through this other deal and everything.” Duntley spoke of her predicament as a deserted young mother and initially expressed reluctance to record the story—the rest of her narrative emphasized her life of hard work to raise children and grandchildren, and, through sheer determination, working to ensure that they received education and vocational training. Gender determined choices, opportunities, and family circumstances whether in marriage, divorce, or desertion.³⁶

Deserted by her first husband, Peggy Cyzeski found work in Malta, at a hospital treating quarry workers with dust pneumonia, in order to support herself and her two children. Another tragic chapter in her story then unfolded: “I worked there till I met Mr. Roe and I married a Mr. Roe. And I supported him for ten years. He would not work, he would not hold a job, he would not work. He was a very good-looking man, he had personality plus, and I had been a

Peggy Cyzeski explained how she learned not to depend on men and how she raised children and grandchildren through her own hard work. She recalled how after her husband left her, she and her children harvested a crop of sweet clover: “[We] mowed it, raked it up with pitchforks, thrashed it out and sacked it, and took it to town. And we had enough money out of that clover to get them in school and pay the rent on the ranch for the next spring.”



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Plc 2008-108 roll 2.2

widow for eight years with my children, and I married this Mr. Roe. . . . I seen him very few times, but I was lonely and alone, and so I married him.” Cyzeski used the term “widow” to describe her state of separation from a husband who had abandoned her, shortening the colloquial phrase “grass widow.” Unlike the “sod widow” whose husband was buried underground, the grass widow’s husband had decided that the grass

was greener elsewhere and abandoned wife and children. She explained how loneliness and, perhaps, social pressure drove her to marry again, even if it was unwise since she was forced to become the primary breadwinner without enjoying any advantages a marital partnership might provide.³⁷

Cyzeski continued to describe how Roe did not follow social expectations to be a responsible provider and mate:

[We leased a Missouri River ranch], bought an old truck, a team, a few chickens, and a hog from my hospital money. . . . And there I was alone again. . . . He wasn’t with me. He was supposed to go out and work on construction and make money and send to us, but he would come home every fall about huntin’ time without a dime. . . . My neighbor loaned me a mowing machine; there was a big

crop of sweet clover had come up on the river bar, and the kids and I mowed it, raked it up with pitchforks, thrashed it out and sacked it, and took it to town. And we had enough money out of that clover to get them in school and pay the rent on the ranch for the next spring. I would take my kids to school in Malta and work in the wintertime. I worked as a nurse for a long time, and then I worked in a cleaning shop as a[n] alteration lady and I mended clothes.³⁸

In contrast to Roe’s irresponsibility and her many disappointments, Cyzeski explained how she learned not to depend on men and how she raised children and grandchildren from her own hard work.

Given that providing for children consumed so many women’s lives and took a physical toll on their bodies, women were still generally reticent to elaborate about their sexual and reproductive histories. For example, Anna Juvan bore one son, and when asked if she had wanted more children, she responded, “Nope, we just didn’t have more; we didn’t have time for more I guess.” Other narrators talked about the general ignorance about reproduction and birth control in the first half of the twentieth century. Bernice Kingsbury remarked that other women had large families because “they didn’t know of any way of protecting themselves.” Mary Zanto remembered

that women commonly nursed a child for as long as possible, at least two years, believing this would help avoid additional pregnancies. Jewell Wolk contended, “There was no contraceptive knowledge,” although women tried all kinds of preparations to prevent or eliminate a pregnancy. She described how some women would leave husbands for the summer and take their children to visit family as a way of reducing sexual contact.³⁹

Minerva Allen remembered that “older [American Indian] people had their own birth control.” Her grandmother and great-grandmother’s generations had few children, but after the reservation “started getting modern” after World War II, women “forgot their traditional values. They didn’t use the old traditional birth control. And that’s what caused large families, alcoholism, and all this stuff. Everything seemed to change.” Not until birth control “was reintroduced” in the 1960s did women regain control over family sizes and their ability to care for them.⁴⁰

Although it was illegal to terminate a pregnancy in Montana until 1973, many women found physicians and other women to help perform abortions.⁴¹ During the 1930s, it is estimated that nearly 25 percent of pregnancies in Montana were aborted. Bernice Kingsbury recalled the desperation of some of her neighbors who could not afford another mouth to feed during the Depression: “It was about ’34 or ’35, this neighbor lady came to me, and I didn’t know her very well, but for some reason she trusted me. Her [three] children were going to a country school with my son, and he told me . . . the only thing they have to

eat is bread with wild honey on it. . . . So anyway, she came to me, and she said, ‘My husband is just riding me every afternoon. I’m not only exhausted, but I’ve learned that I’m pregnant.’ And she said, ‘If I have an abortion, can I come stay with you for a couple days?’” Kingsbury made certain that the woman saw a “regular doctor” for the procedure and then invited the woman to stay with her.⁴²

Women’s inability to control their own reproduction often led to depression and feelings of powerlessness. Several narrators told stories, perhaps apocryphal, about women who met untimely ends due to unwanted pregnancies. Anna Juvan recalled a woman in Scotch Coulee who despaired over another pregnancy and a wayward husband: “She had six kids, and she was pregnant and was going to have twins again, and she just took off. . . . That night she jumped in the reservoir and froze to death. I’ll never forget that. She left six little kids. But she didn’t drink though, not that I know of. She was just mixed [up].”⁴³

More than anything, women emphasized that the burden of children (and sometimes grandchildren) shaped their choices in life. Ida Duntley, who described a long list of restaurant jobs she held after her homestead experiment, explained why she relocated from Great Falls to the small community of Geraldine, which had fewer economic opportunities: “I found it too hard for me to try to raise those girls in Great Falls—I couldn’t—and you can take care of them better in a small town. I couldn’t have watched those kids and worked out in the city. And I had to do it. I had the girls and I had to take care of them. . . . That’s why I started to work in Geraldine ’cause then I put the kids to school in Geraldine and stayed right there.”⁴⁴

Sometimes women hinted at lives they might have had if unencumbered by family responsibilities. As a young woman, Bernice Kingsbury played the violin in a dance band in western Montana, and she recalled how her musical aspirations were cut short by a premature marriage and pregnancy: “And so I married somebody else and had a child by him, but we never estab[lished]—just a kid marriage, you know. And so I went back to [Tacoma] with my folks and went to



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Plac 2008-108 roll 1.10



Lacking contraceptive knowledge, many women had large families. Mary Zanto (above) remembered that women commonly nursed a child for as long as possible, at least two years, believing this would help avoid additional pregnancies.

beauty school. My eldest sister took care of my little boy for me, but I'd spend every weekend with her in order to be with my son. . . . I found somebody that would finance me on the Dollar Steamship line, and I was going to the Orient and have a beauty shop on the ship. It sounded like a great idea. And I went to visit my son. . . . I thought, 'Nope, if I'm gonna have my baby, I'd better get to where I can have him every day.'" With a loan from her mother and brother, Kingsbury then opened a beauty shop in Valier. Her narrative suggests a range of opportunities but emphasizes that her obligation to raise her child sent her in another direction, exchanging her more exotic choices for life in a small Montana town.⁴⁵

When relationships failed, women felt fortunate if former husbands maintained a role in childrearing. Rose Larson of Roundup spoke about her own unsuccessful early marriage and the economic circumstances that constrained young couples and often burdened them with family oversight. She described how she asserted her independence while collaborating with her ex-husband to raise her children:

My dad worked in the mines, and each kid tried to get a little job of his own to see if he can make ends meet. . . . Then when I was sixteen, I got married. Then we lived in Klein for a while. Then the Klein mines shut down. . . . Because my husband was a younger man in the mine, he was out of a job, so we moved out in the ranch . . . with his uncle. That's where we opened a coal mine, and we worked there until we couldn't do no more. You couldn't sell the coal, you couldn't give it away, and years were getting dry, so we moved to town. I had two children, two girls, had to move to town account of school, and I got a job and he got a job. And that's how we made our living. Then we finally broke up . . . and of course, I was just a young punk—I didn't know too much in them days either—and he would sort of listen to all the old folks, what they were saying, so we broke up. But we raised the kids together, and they went to high school and one was a hair dresser. . . . And I worked at one place to the next, and I wind up at the Vienna Café. I worked there eight or ten years.⁴⁶

Helen Raymond also spoke of cordial relations with her ex-husband. Although they did not share children, they amicably divided property. In the 1930s and 1940s, they ran a hot springs and café in Silver Star and then a tavern in Virginia City. "We decided to separate, and I took Virginia City and he kept the lease in Silver Star. . . . Yes, that was our settlement, as we would put it. But we stayed friends. He was up to see me quite often, and it took quite a while before it all worked out." After describing her work, running a bar and restaurant and investing in some mining ventures in Virginia City, Helen mentioned another marriage, but she was vague about its details: "I married Dick [Raymond] in '42. . . . And then we were divorced, about nine years later. I always worked when I was here." Without pausing to elaborate on this other marriage, Raymond immediately resumed discussing her work life.⁴⁷

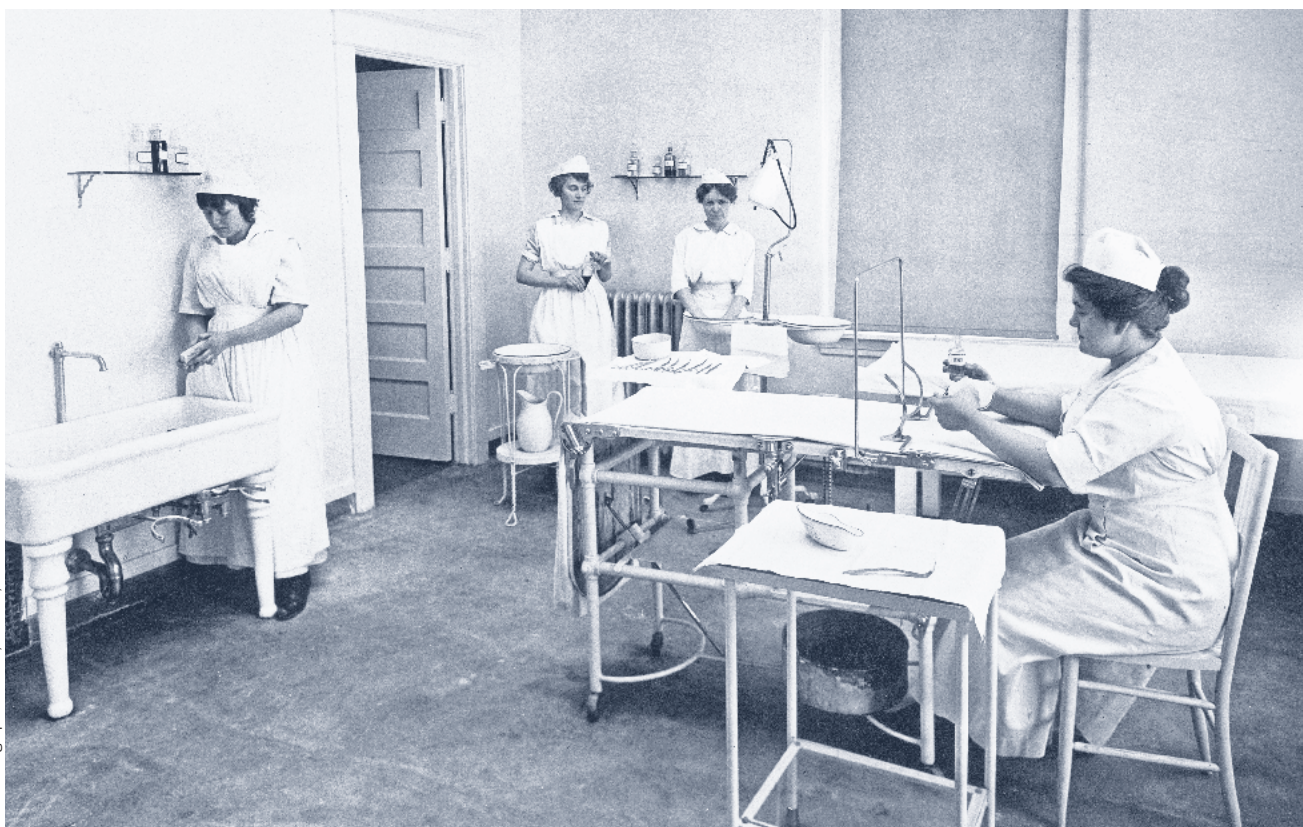
Reconsidering Women's Narratives

The MHS oral history interviews underscore how Montana women's work, relationships, and caretaking roles were inextricably linked in the first half of the twentieth century. Although initially women may have demurred when approached for an interview, saying, "Oh, I don't have much to tell you," their narratives reveal otherwise. Each personal reflection invites further analysis, and even brief stories offer rich insights about women's lives that reach well beyond the details of what happened in a particular place and time. Absent are the textbook references to familiar historical categories—modernity, depression, strikes, and war. Instead, individual hardships, the extraordinary, and the mundane often preoccupied women's memories. For example, Edie Bennett recalled a dramatic 1911 mill fire but remembered little else about the Somers Lumber Company that dominated her community. She recalled canning fruit but not gaining the right to vote. And she remembered selling her horse for the World War I effort but little else about the war: "I sold 'Old Buck' to the government. Yes, that was a lot of money at that time. That was an awfully lot of money especially for a woman, you know." Often, women couldn't tell me much about town life or familiar historic events. When I asked Clara Fewkes about the bustling mill town of Eureka, replete with many saloons before the mill burned,



When asked about the bustling mill town of Eureka, replete with many saloons before the mill burned, Clara Fewkes explained that her hospital job kept her too busy to notice her surroundings: "Of course I was working twelve hours a day. I wasn't hobnobbing—the group that I saw were the sick and the church people because they would come and visit the hospital."

Hospitals, including two in Sidney, provided many jobs for Montana women. Above is Mrs. Meadow's hospital in 1908, and below are staff members in Mrs. Carberry's new hospital in 1915 with (left to right) Miss Marion Woodward, Miss Ester Thorson, Mrs. Christina Carberry, and Miss Nettie Ray in attendance.





Even when tragedy struck, women's narratives generally emphasized their perseverance and their individual pluck as they strove to survive and overcome adversity. The sympathetic and strong heroine is a familiar narrative convention—one sometimes evoked by people recounting their own lives. Rita LaVoie (left) of Milltown, believed she “was fortunate in a way when God decided I should be here. I think he created me an unnaturally happy person and that was the lifesaver. Otherwise, I would have gone to the depths I'm sure.”

she explained that her hospital job kept her too busy to notice her surroundings: “Of course I was working twelve hours a day. I wasn't hobnobbing—the group that I saw were the sick and the church people because they would come and visit the hospital.”⁴⁸

Even when tragedy struck, women's narratives generally emphasized their perseverance and their individual pluck as they strove to overcome adversity. The sympathetic and strong heroine is a familiar narrative convention—one sometimes evoked by people recounting their own lives. Many Montana women asserted their toughness, bragged about never having taken “handouts,” and attributed their endurance to particular individual characteristics. Like Rita LaVoie of Milltown, who believed she “was fortunate in a way when God decided I should be here. I think he created me an unnaturally happy person and that was the lifesaver. Otherwise, I would have gone to the depths I'm sure.”⁴⁹

The heightened sense of individualism the women expressed can also be understood within the histori-

cal context of the 1980s, when the interviews were conducted. At that time, in Montana and throughout the nation, the shutdown of industries, the erosion of labor unions, the dismantling of the welfare state, and the shrinking of middle-class wages all challenged ideals about collectivity, community, and solidarity. The women interviewed in the 1980s had also framed their accounts to highlight and contrast what they perceived to be the different choices available for women a half century before the gains of the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Narrators frequently contrasted “then” and “now,” referring to women's more circumscribed lives in the past and, in many ways, marveling at the choices women had in the 1980s.

Narrators' sometimes opaque references to contemporary social movements also reveal other points about collective goals. The narratives stress what may seem to be two contradictory themes: one focuses on the canon of individual forbearance and the other highlights an essentially egalitarian community. The women often repeated expressions like “We were all in the same boat.” Also, in every account, women referred to others—neighbors, teachers, local businesses, unions, and family members—who helped out at critical moments, by loaning money, sharing advice, providing labor or equipment, securing a job, or helping them realize a dream or goal. Life may have been a struggle, and they may have had to depend on their wits and strength to navigate economic and family challenges, but these Montana women repeatedly referred to the importance of their networks and community support systems. Invariably, they celebrated an almost mythic, but bygone, equality and simplicity during the 1900s to 1950s, in contrast to the 1980s, which they viewed as a period haunted by

selfishness, noting, “We were happy to have enough to eat” or “We always shared what we had.”

Not surprisingly, there were lots of silences in these narratives. Women often avoided discussion of subjects they feared would generate societal disapproval or making public events and actions they had not clearly sorted out in their own minds. Many times women asked interviewers to “turn that thing [recorder] off” before sharing intimate details, criticizing family members, or describing painful prejudice they experienced as women of color. The women still wanted to keep some of their experiences confidential, and they were fearful of offending members of the community in which they resided. But the narrators also recognized the importance of telling stories so that their lives would add up—not in terms of providing accurate chronologies for the sake of history, but in order to explain the decisions and choices they

had made, always with the implication that history might have turned out differently. These narrative tendencies become clearer when reexamining a body of interviews rather than depending on a single oral history account to illuminate a period, event, or woman’s life. The sting of the past, or the silences or words that disguise that pain, is evident in these narratives by Montana women, even if it was not clear to me twenty-five years ago when I first heard them.⁵⁰

The prominent themes of survival and the intersections of work and family life in these oral histories speak to particular times in the American West and to individual experiences based on class, race, place, and gender. Oral history reveals information about lives not available in other sources. Yet, as oral historian Sherna Gluck observed, a problem in women’s oral history is that we speak to the survivors—the women who found coping strategies that worked



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAc 94-46 A1.15a

The women interviewed in the 1980s framed their accounts to highlight and contrast what they perceived to be the different choices available for women a half century before the gains of the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Here, an unidentified woman shells peas or snaps beans circa the 1890s in a photograph from a family album of the Nowlan and Lynch families, who lived in Plains and homesteaded in Pleasant Valley in northwest Montana.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Plc 2006-53.7

Emphasizing their endurance, Montana women expressed a resistance in their narratives that may have reflected part of their experiences—but not their lives in total. Oral history projects and the reexamination of a large body of interviews such as those in the MHS collection provide a window into the shifting collective view of the past—a viewpoint imbued with the values, politics, and ideas of the time. Above, Margaret Ashworth joins Mike Yuhus and Wylie Ashworth in the kitchen of the Rainbow Café on Main Street, Helena, circa 1924.

and who agreed to be interviewed. Those who were “battered, silenced, or who have gone insane are not around to tell us their stories.”⁵¹ Emphasizing their endurance, Montana women expressed a resistance in their narratives that may have reflected part of their experiences—but not their lives in total. But we work with the stories that we collect. Oral history projects and the reexamination of a large body of interviews such as those in the MHS collection provide a window into the shifting collective view of the past—a viewpoint imbued with the values, politics, and ideas of the time. In many ways, these interviews of Montana women do end up as collective stories, based on gender—and based on the expectations that the narrators themselves, their families, and society had about their roles as women. Hearing them today, we can also find meaning in what is not explicitly stated but is in the telling or in the traces left behind.

The narratives supply surprising insights if we listen attentively to the gaps, the hesitations, and the hints that provide a fuller account of the stories of subordination, struggle, and memory.

Laurie Mercier is the Claudius O. and Mary W. Johnson Distinguished Professor of History at Washington State University–Vancouver. From 1981 to 1988, Mercier worked as the oral historian for the Montana Historical Society. Her recent publications include *Speaking History: The American Past through Oral Histories, 1865–2001* (2010); *The 1970s Social History of the United States* (2009); *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670–2000* (2006); and *Anaconda: Labor, Community, and Culture in Montana’s Smelter City* (2001). Mercier is the author of a number of articles published in *Montana* and a member of the magazine’s editorial board.

Notes

1. Idonica Golding Duntley, interview by author, Apr. 28, 1982, Fort Benton; Pauline Lenz DeBray, interview by author, May 23, 1982, Glasgow; Minerva Allen, interview by John Terreo, June 7, 1989, Hays. All of the interviews mentioned in this essay are deposited with MHS; unless otherwise noted, interviews were conducted in Montana. From 1981 to 1988, I was the MHS oral historian and traveled every corner of the state to interview women and men about their life experiences and observations. My successor, John Terreo, and a dozen other oral historians added to this significant collection, preserving memories about specific events and lifeways for future generations. This article touches on themes that I explore more extensively in a book to be published by the Montana Historical Society Press, *Surviving Montana: Women's Oral Narratives and Work, Family, and Place in the Northern Rockies, 1900–1950*. The author wishes to thank Mary Murphy, Desiree Hellegers, and Molly Holz for their helpful suggestions regarding this article.

2. Although Montana's urban population grew steadily from 1890 to 1940, by 1940 around 62 percent of the state's population still resided in rural areas. The U.S. Bureau of the Census defined "urban" as any incorporated town with over twenty-five hundred residents. Table 3, "Urban and Rural Population for the State, 1870–1940," 1940 Census for Montana, 477.

3. The titles of the 1980s MHS oral history projects emphasize the focus of each: *Montanans at Work*, *Small Town Montana*, *Montana Women as Community Builders*, *Metals Manufacturing in Montana Communities*, *Native American Educators*, and *The New Deal in Montana*. We designed these projects to fill significant gaps in available sources and to give voice to people whose perspectives were generally missing from the historical record.

4. On the changing phases of women's and feminist oral history, see Sherna Berger Gluck, "Women's Oral History: Is It So Special?" in *Handbook of Oral History*, eds. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Meyers, Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD, 2006), 357–83; and Sue Armitage, "The Stages of Women's Oral History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (New York, 2011), 169–85. Gluck and Armitage both note that the *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 1977 special issue on women's oral history reflected the early celebratory collecting phase, and the 1991 publication of Gluck and Daphne Patai's anthology, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of*

Oral History (New York, 1991), captured changing perspectives about oral interview content and methods, including recognition of the interview as a complex representation of experience and a greater self-awareness about the interviewer/interviewee relationship.

5. There is an extensive literature that discusses the peculiar strengths of oral history as a narrative form. See, for example, Luisa Passerini, *Facism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (New York, 1987); Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (New York, 1992); Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, WI, 1997); and Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York, 2010).

6. Anna Green contends that "human subjectivity is more active, engaged, and critical than contemporary theory [about collective memory] permits," in "Can Memory Be Collective?" in Ritchie, *Oxford Handbook*, 96–109, quote 108.

7. Clara Enden Brock Fewkes, interview by author, Aug. 24, 1983, Rexford.

8. Ibid.

9. Lydia Keating, interview by author, Mar. 31, 1982, Utica.

10. Laurie Mercier, "'You Had to Make Every Minute Count': Women in Montana Agriculture," *Montana* 38 (Autumn 1988): 53.

11. Concepción Bengochea, interview by author, Oct. 19, 1982, Nashua.

12. Anna Frieluch Juvan, interview by author, Sept. 28, 1982, Livingston.

13. Lena Brown Slausen, interview by Mary Murphy, Dec. 2, 1987, Butte.

14. Florence McDonald Smith, interview by author, Apr. 22, 1982, Ronan.

15. Ibid.

16. Verna McKean Carlson, interview by author, Oct. 27, 1981, Circle.

17. Rose Larson, interview by author, May 10, 1982, Roundup.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Noreen Romig Brown, interview by author, July 26, 1987, Fort Peck.

21. Grace Hardcastle Cunningham, interview by author, Mar. 11, 1982, Butte.

22. Alice Shepka, interview by Alice Finnegan, June 17, 1987, Anaconda.

23. Kathryn Wetzel Newton Dewing, interview by author, Aug. 11, 1986, Anaconda, in Laurie Mercier, *Anaconda: Labor, Community, and Culture in Montana's Smelter City* (Urbana, 2001), 99.

24. Dorothy Bruner Floerchinger, interview by author, Apr. 10, 1984, Conrad.

25. Lillian and Loretta Jarussi, interview by author, Sept. 24, 1982, Red Lodge.

26. For more on the fluid nature

of marriage restrictions and teaching in Montana, see Women's History Matters, "'Must a woman . . . give it all up when she marries?': The Debate over Employing Married Women as Teachers," MHS website accessed Dec. 18, 2014, <http://montanawomenshistory.org/must-a-woman-give-it-all-up-when-she-marries-the-debate-over-employing-married-women-as-teachers/>.

27. Jarussi interview.

28. Bengochea interview.

29. Thelma Stearns Bondy, interview by author, July 31, 1987, Fort Peck.

30. Juvan interview.

31. Jewell Peterson Wolk, interview by Jackie Day, Nov. 29, 1984, Cut Bank.

32. Helen Shute Raymond, interview by author, Oct. 9, 1981, Butte.

33. Lula Martínez, interview by author, Sept. 1987, Portland, OR.

34. Tomas Cvrcek argues that after 1900 an increasing number of marriages were breaking up, outside the law, through unilateral desertion; therefore, recorded divorces undercount the full extent of marital disruptions, especially among poorer couples, in "U.S. Marital Disruptions and their Economic and Social Correlates, 1860–1948," *Journal of Family History* 36 (Apr. 2011), 142–58. Several scholars have studied the high rates of divorce in Montana and the American West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See, for example, Paula Petrik, "Not a Love Story: Bordeaux v. Bordeaux," *Montana* 41 (Spring 1991), 32–46; and Glenda Riley, *Building and Breaking Families in the American West* (Albuquerque, NM, 1996). However, census statistics reveal that divorce rates for Montana do not vary much from other Mountain and Pacific states in the first six decades of the twentieth century. U.S. Department of Health, Education,



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAc 2009.2.A1.118

The two women pictured here are doing the laundry at the Bower Brothers Ranch circa 1905.

and Welfare, "One Hundred Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics in the U.S., 1867-1967" (Rockville, MD, 1973), table 19 "Mean Number of Children per Divorce, Each State," table 21 "Percent of Divorces Granted to Wife, by State."

35. Laurie Mercier, "Probing Memory and Experience: The Untapped Potential of Oral History (Re)Collections," in *Oral History, Community, and Work in the American West*, ed. Jessie L. Embry (Tucson, AZ, 2013), 49.

36. Duntley interview.

37. Thelma Marie "Peggy" Dobson Cyzeski, May 21, 1982, Glasgow.

38. Ibid.

39. Juvan interview; Bernice Johnson Kingsbury, interview by author, Sept. 17, 1982, Helena; Mary Zanto, interview by author, Apr. 28, 1982, Fort Benton; Wolk interview. Wolk remembered that women commonly used cocoa butter, Lysol, or slippery elm bark to prevent or terminate a pregnancy.

40. Allen interview.

41. For more on abortions and reproductive control in Montana, see Mary Melcher, "'Women's Matters': Birth Control, Prenatal Care, and Childbirth in Rural Montana, 1910-1940," *Montana*

41 (Summer 1991): 47-56; Diane Sands, "Using Oral History to Chart the Course of Illegal Abortions in Montana," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7:1 (1983): 32-37; and Todd Savitt, "Abortion in the Old West: The Trials of Dr. Edwin S. Kellogg of Helena, Montana," *Montana* 57 (Summer 2007): 3-20.

42. Kingsbury interview.

43. Juvan interview.

44. Duntley interview. In my research for the book *Anaconda*, I found that the smelter city registered a high percentage of widowed women employed in various enterprises, suggesting that residents endorsed a "moral code" that supported widowed female breadwinners (p. 41).

45. Kingsbury interview.

46. Larson interview.

47. Raymond interview.

48. Edie Bennett, interview by author, Dec. 2, 1981, Somers; Fewkes interview.

49. Rita LaVoie, interview by Mary Melcher, Dec. 19, 1981, Missoula.

50. Oral history provides a powerful measure of how individuals and communities remain profoundly affected by the past. In her book detailing the tragedy following the 1947 partition of India, Urvashi Butalia claims that people's

reluctance to recall particular memories sometimes points to their own complicity in this history, as well as their pain. Butalia asks, "How do we reach beyond the stories into the silences they hide?" in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham, NC, 2000), 8, 10. In her study of the Mississippi civil rights movement, the late Kim Lacy Rogers found that narrators had a variety of strategies, often reflecting their own class and activist positions, which they used to describe the painful past. The common thread in these narratives, Rogers contends, is the "residue of collective trauma." However politically transformed these Delta African American communities became, they could not "fully escape the damage inflicted by the past." Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York, 2006), 13, 18.

51. Susan Armitage and Sherna Berger Gluck, "Reflections on Women's Oral History: An Exchange," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19:3 (1998), 1-11 (Gluck quote, 8).