

# Montana Women's Clubs



Tri-County Historical Society, Anaconda

**Women's reading and debating clubs, such as this one that met in a room above the Anaconda city library, were popular at the turn of the century.**

# at the Turn of the Century

by Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs

Women of the frontier, like women today, cannot be easily categorized, either in their motives for emigrating to the West or in their lifestyles once there. Some, of course, were reluctant to leave the comforts of “civilization,” while countless others looked forward to going west. Each woman came west with her own expectations; yet, it was an immeasurable comfort to women on the frontier to be able to communicate with each other. Through the development of personal relationships and social organizations, pioneer women could discuss such common problems as food, housing, and children. Later, women’s clubs made possible cultural and intellectual self-expression, something especially welcome to those 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 and general self-improvement, but also to reform their society. The nineteenth century cult of true womanhood, which loosely defined women as the guardians of virtue and morality, aligned women with each other to attack the immorality they observed around them; this alignment produced a strong feeling of sisterhood. The cult presented women with two conflicting messages. On the one hand, the nineteenth century woman was expected to make the home her center of attention, to enshrine it with honor, and to sacrifice everything for its protection. On the other hand, she was encouraged to pursue, in a unified and organized fashion, a reforming effort outside the home.<sup>1</sup>

The women of Montana at the turn of the century chose to focus on the cult of true womanhood’s reformist message while accepting its pronouncements about their role in the home. They also chose to avoid a total break with the notion of divided spheres of influence—male in the public sphere and female in the private—by focusing their attention on women’s traditional areas of concern: sanitation, education, and the welfare of children. Underlying these choices was the quiet yet persistent demand for self-expression and involvement outside the home.<sup>2</sup>

**T**he homesteading rush in Montana took place later than it had in many other western states. Thanks to the success of the promotional enterprises of the railroads, the development of new farming techniques, and the enactment of the Enlarged Homestead Act in 1909, developers of the Montana homestead frontier quickly made up for lost time. By 1910, agriculture exceeded mining as the main source of income for Montanans. Montana's homesteaders represented a diverse lot, sharing only the common characteristic of youth. Most had been born in the United States; the 1920 census showed that only 17.1 per cent 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 1870 census, Montana had eight men for every woman. By 1910, only 39 per cent of the state's population was female. Even in the growing urban centers of Butte, Helena, and Missoula, there were relatively few women.<sup>3</sup>

Although they were few, women influenced the success or failure of the homesteading enterprise. Survival depended on more than their mere physical presence; 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 responsibility with enthusiasm. They assisted men in accumulating landholdings, raised poultry, grew vegetable gardens, and helped with the milking. Aside from using it to buy food for the family, the money they raised from selling milk, eggs, canned goods, and butter was used to clothe the family or to buy more land.<sup>4</sup>

The women of Montana may have adopted traditional roles, but they also advanced their own cause as individuals by injecting a personal flavor into these roles and by developing a sense of what women could accomplish as a group. As author and homesteader Helena Huntington Smith noted, if she had to write the epitaph for women on the frontier, it would be "They did the necessary."<sup>5</sup>

Women on the frontier felt more isolated than did their male counterparts. A lack of commu-

nication with other women reinforced the loneliness of the ranch and the farmhouse. One agricultural historian described the migraine—an illness brought on by fears and tensions—as the most recurrent complaint among women living in the isolated frontier environment, an environment with blizzards, prairie fires, snakes, coyotes, and wolves.<sup>6</sup>

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. These essential ingredients included a shared sense of place, a certain limited size, and, perhaps most importantly, a sense of shared values.<sup>7</sup>

Women on the frontier did share social mores, which provided an important bonding agent among them. Women wanted to participate in developing a community that would ensure the survival of certain qualities: hard work, love of family, sobriety, and civility. Their values were on a somewhat different plane than men's. Women lived in a "domestically informed community" as opposed to the "market economy oriented community" in which men generally felt more comfortable. 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.<sup>8</sup>

**H**omesteaders maintained gardens for more than just vegetables. Many homestead accounts written by women describe the satisfaction they felt upon seeing planted flowers bloom. 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, women's club activities would center on a simi-

1. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-174; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977), 8.

2. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 181.

3. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *13th Annual Census of the United States, Population of Montana by Counties and Minor Civil Divisions Census, 1911, 1-10; Fourteenth Annual Census of the United States, Population and Composition of the States, vol. 3, 1923, 574-586; Ninth Annual Census of the United States, The Statistics of the Population of the United States, vol. 1, 1870.*

4. Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 210.

5. Helena Huntington Smith, "Pioneers in Petticoats," *American Heritage* 10 (February 1959): 102.





MHS Photograph Archives

Women in rural areas shared books and magazines as well as their knowledge of gardening, cooking, remedies for illness, and other household skills. In this 1890s photograph, women visit outside the Enright's homestead near Glasgow.

lar idea: making the community appear clean, peaceful, ordered, and pretty.<sup>9</sup>

Montana's women homesteaders joined together to relieve their isolation, to educate themselves, and to build a proper sort of society. 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." Women also read and discussed popular 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*. Newspapers were also high on the entertainment list, even though they often arrived weeks late. All of these publications, particularly *Godey's*, promoted the cult of true womanhood, reinforcing the dual image of women as gentle tamers—refined bearers of so-

cial values who smoothed the rough edges of frontier life—and as sunbonneted helpmates who performed mundane duties so that their men could get on to the more important things.<sup>10</sup>

Women also sought relief from isolation simply by conversing with each other and exchanging information, including tips on birth control, childbearing, and 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 women or by correspondence.<sup>11</sup>

Community-oriented activities like barn dances, harvest parties, or holiday celebrations also brought relief from isolation. Although these activities included all members of the homesteading society, women played a central

6. Mary Hargreaves, "Women in the Agricultural Settlement of the Northern Plains," *Agricultural History* 50 (January 1976): 179-189.

7. Robert Hine, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate But Not Alone* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 21.

8. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 8.

9. Jane Buck, AAUW Oral History Interview, OH 103, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena [MHS].

10. Susia Huston, UM Women's Oral History Project Interview, UMOH 49, University of Montana Archives, Mansfield Library, Missoula [UMA]; Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), 144; Jensen and Miller, "Gentle Tamers Revisited," 179.

11. UM Women's Oral History Project, UMOH 49, UMA; Wavie Wenatchee Charlton, "Cry of the Homestead," mimeographed, 1976, UMA.



J. L. Breum, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives

Farm and ranch women organized holiday gatherings, such as this 1908 Fourth of July picnic in Fallon, and took advantage of the opportunity to visit and share common interests.

role. While men and children were eager participants, it remained for women to organize these gatherings and prepare the food.<sup>12</sup>

Holidays, especially the Fourth of July and Christmas, were "grand occasions," even though the environment in parts of Montana 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 holiday desserts. One homesteader still remembered decades later the oranges her mother somehow obtained for Christmas.<sup>13</sup>

Without their willingness to convey knowledge, share trials and tribulations, and generally aid and comfort each other, many women would have ended up like Beret in Rolvaag's novel, *Giants in the Earth*: depressed, homesick, and eventually insane.<sup>14</sup>

12. Everett Dick, *Sod House Frontier, 1854-1890* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1954), 380.

13. Montana Historical Society, *Not in Precious Metals Alone* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1976), 175; Albright Papers, Small Collection [SC] 1771, MHS.

**T**he establishment of local women's clubs was part of a national movement that had originated in New York in 1868 and had spread to Montana by the late 1880s. These clubs helped women fulfill their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. At the same time, the clubs provided a rare opportunity for women to educate and help themselves. 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." Each year, the club selected a subject, such as English literature, history, art, music, or current events, as a program.<sup>15</sup>

Although many Montana women's clubs were composed primarily of prominent women, other clubs served the needs of younger women and girls. A young girls' club, the Avalea of Deer Lodge, consisted of seven young ladies who enjoyed an informal program with simple rules. According to Mrs. W. F. Christie, director of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, "the

14. O. E. Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* (New York: Perennial Library, 1927).

15. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 188; Mrs. W. F. Christie, "The Women's Clubs of Montana," *Rocky Mountain Magazine* 2 (April 1901): 580.

16. Christie, "Women's Clubs of Montana," 581.





Women directly contributed to Montana's livestock business in many ways, not the least of which was food preparation. This photograph shows (l. to r.) Madge McLean, Mrs. Kenneth McLean, James Hamilton, and Dot McLean at a sheep camp in eastern Montana.

meetings are enlivened with a little music, a little embroidery, current topics and occasional demonstrations of scientific cooking."<sup>16</sup>

Many clubs organized along the lines of Bozeman's State Housekeepers Society, founded in 1894; its object was the practical study of more advanced methods of housekeeping and home-making. 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 the early history of Montana, while at the same time the members pursued interests in domestic science, literature, and child culture.<sup>17</sup>

By participating in literary clubs, urban Montana women were able to fulfill their role as established by the cult of true womanhood and, at the same time, assert their need for 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. The club considered topics such as "Should Marriage Laws be Revised?" and "Preservation of Good Temper in the Housekeeper." The members also discussed 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."<sup>18</sup>

The As You Like It Club promoted Missoula's first Fourth of July celebration and took an active part in planting trees on the grounds of the University of Montana. The women pursued literary activities and discussed history, health, travel, philosophy, and suffrage.<sup>19</sup>

Literary clubs of this nature also helped women gain confidence by encouraging them to research, write, and present papers. Literary societies fostered the first libraries in Montana

17. Ibid., 589.

18. As You Like It Club Minutes, Manuscript Collection [MC] 89, UMA.

19. As You Like It Club Clippings File, MC 89, UMA.

communities because they found reading facilities sorely lacking. For example, homesteader Dorothy Floerschinger remembered that the Conrad Women's Club founded the local library and organized holiday celebrations and flower shows. In the small towns of Baker, Stevensville, Red Lodge, and Laurel, a similar pattern emerged. Local literary societies began small lending libraries that 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 side of the cult of true womanhood.<sup>20</sup>

**W**ith 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 public welfare, community sanitation, wholesome public entertainment, and "all educational facilities in our midst" and supported such civic improvements as street lights, a bandstand, sidewalks, and cemetery gates. The women of Augusta took their role as guardians of morality seriously. They wanted to improve themselves and their families, but they also were determined to have their community symbolize the order, morality, and civility that society had taught them to appreciate.<sup>21</sup>

Other urban communities developed similar women's clubs. In Helena, for instance, a Current Topics Club was 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."<sup>22</sup>

In 1898, women and men in Helena organized the Helena Improvement Society to facilitate keeping streets and sidewalks clean, improve the school grounds, trim and prevent the destruction of trees, and promote the build-

ing of a footpath up Mount Helena. The society also organized picnics, dances, and plays and established a city park system. The society objected to cows wandering on school grounds and the congregation of boys around the public library, and it sponsored flower plantings by schoolchildren. In striving to make Helena an ideal city, women in the Helena Improvement Society followed the principles of the cult of true womanhood while expressing their individual need for active involvement in community affairs.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

By the turn of the century, women in Montana had moved away from narrowly defined roles to experience a new sense of sisterhood, and organizations like the Current Topics Club and the Helena Improvement Society began to share members with such well-established reform movements as the temperance and suffrage campaigns.

**T**he center of activity for women's clubs in Montana was the Butte urban area. According to Mrs. Christie, six clubs were "thoroughly organized" in Butte by the turn of the century, with no two being alike in plan. The Homer Club, the Atlas Club, Woman's Club of Butte, West Side Shakespeare, the Ethical Culture Club, and the Daughters of Erin (the ladies' auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians) found members in Butte. Three of these clubs belonged to the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and all were "interested in practical work tending to improve the social, educational, and moral conditions of the community." As one proof of this interest, Mrs. Christie recalled that art in the public schools

20. Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), 68; interview with Dorothy Floerschinger by Stephenie A. Tubbs, UMOH 121, UMA.

21. Augusta Civic Society Records, SC 1735, MHS.

22. Christie, "Women's Clubs of Montana," 582.

23. Helena Improvement Society Minutes, SC 1712, MHS.





MHS Photograph Archives

Urban women frequently attended socials, such as this costume tea held in September 1898 at D. A. Floweree's home on Dearborn Street in Helena.

was introduced through the influence of the women's clubs.<sup>25</sup>

Some of Butte's women's clubs catered to a specific type of membership. The Ethical Culture Club, for example, consisted 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 their club. Members of this club drew no class lines and a "feeling of helpfulness predominates."<sup>26</sup>

Many clubs, like the Daughters of Erin, helped widows who were members. They also attended to the funeral arrangements of mem-

bers. Other organizations, like 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 for those who wanted to travel home. The relief committee presented a memorial to the legislature explaining the need for a home for destitute children and a reformatory for the "neglected children of our cities who are growing up in ignorance and crime."<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most important function of a relief committee was the help it specifically

24. *Helena Independent*, April 18, 1905.

25. Christie, "Women's Clubs of Montana," 583.

26. *Ibid.*, 587.

27. Ancient Order of Hibernians Records, MC 112, UMA; Helena Ladies Relief Committee Minutes, SC 997, MHS.



provided 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 Ladies 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. Furthermore, the committee eased the minds of poverty-stricken mothers by paying the funeral bills of their children. Over a one-year period, the committee aided some one thousand people, many of whom were no doubt women.<sup>28</sup>


As cities and communities developed and prospered, women became concerned about those elements of society that they saw as corrupting their towns. First they attacked the saloons. In 1883, the Montana chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union was organized. This group of thirteen local unions and ten departments hoped to fulfill the gentle tamer role by ridding the frontier of drunken disorderliness. Through public education, social pressure, and reform legislation, the WCTU sought dry-state status for Montana. In 1886, organizers of the WCTU joined forces with the suffrage movement in order to bring about their desired goals, but it was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that they achieved their greatest strength (by 1916, the WCTU in Montana had 4,167 active members in 202 local unions). Both movements showed that women on the Montana homestead frontier experienced a growing sense of social and political power through their clubs' active participation in social and civic affairs. Clearly, the clubwoman'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.<sup>29</sup>

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."<sup>30</sup> This experience came to fruition in the activities of the WCTU and the various suffrage organiza-

tions. In the meantime, the experience proved valuable in allowing women to instruct each other, to develop their families and communities along certain well-defined lines, and, above all, to enjoy a sense of comradeship with other frontier women.

Individual woman-to-woman relationships allowed for the communication of fundamental information about 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. Their involvement in literary clubs helped the community by establishing libraries and other amenities, and their activities in relief committees and civic improvement societies worked not only for the development of the ideal city in terms of appearance, but in terms of charity and compassion as well.

**W**omen on the Montana homestead frontier used their organizations as a means of expressing themselves. This access to self-expression enabled them to enjoy an environment that not long before had been viewed as unsuitable for human habitation. Despite Montana's rough climate and extreme isolation, many women—particularly clubwomen—learned to respect, appreciate, and love the state. They learned that they could take pride in their accomplishments; they 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 was 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. 

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28. Helena Relief Committee Minutes, SC 997, MHS.

29. W.C.T.U. Records, MC 160, MHS.

30. Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 208.



Around 1900, women in Montana organized political clubs, such as the Montana WCTU, shown above at its 1917 meeting in Havre, and literary and social clubs, such as the Current Topics Club of Helena, shown below at its 40th anniversary meeting in 1932.

