



The American West

# Women of the West

by Virginia Scharff

Women are like water to Western history. Both have flowed through the terrain we have come to call the West, long before the inhabitants conceived of themselves as part of an expanding United States. Both have been represented as scarce commodities in a region where masculinity and aridity have appeared, quite simply, as natural. But just as the West could not have developed without water, the region never could have flourished without important contributions from the women who lived there.

From the Paleolithic period to the present, women have made essential contributions to the claiming of western places as homes to families and communities. They have gathered, grown, and processed the vegetables and animals that fed and clothed their families, have constructed and maintained dwellings, and have taken part in the rituals and creative activities that nurture the connections of kinship, spirit, and trade. Once you start looking for it, women's history is, in fact, everywhere in the West. When we examine petroglyphs and potsherds, fragments of archaeological remains at ancient pueblos in New Mexico, we might envision women at work: planting and hoeing corn, harvesting and grinding, cooking meals, storing what isn't consumed, and communicating the world they see around them. Now imagine the strip malls and superstores and fast-food franchises of Seattle, Sacramento, St. Louis, or San Antonio. Would such a landscape even be possible without wives and mothers piloting automobiles and wielding cell phones, strategizing and navigating their way through an American day? Picture a Walmart or a Wendy's, and see where today's western women gather the necessities of life in the contemporary West of car-culture suburbs.

From the fields to the franchises, women have worked to sustain their households in the midst of a wider terrain. And at the same time, gendered ideas about the ways humans make and claim homes have shaped social worlds, public life, and political decisions, throughout the history and across the spaces of the American West. The diverse peoples who have occupied the West have, of course, held a variety of ideas about what roles women and men ought to play in social life, and how gender ought to organize social power. Sometimes those ideas lay at the very heart of larger events.

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Take, for example, the epic struggle for control of the continent in the nineteenth century. Out on the Great Plains, clan-based societies of indigenous people practiced polygamy and migrated from summer to winter camps in search of grass and game. Cheyenne and Arapaho women, working alongside their mothers, daughters, sisters, and sister wives, butchered bison and other large game, and tanned the hides, sewed the parfleche bags and tipis, and set up and packed up the camps that marked the seasons and cycles of nomadic life. American trappers and traders who moved out onto the Plains in the first half of the nineteenth century often sought to garner influence among Indian peoples by marrying influential Indian women. The women, in turn, stood to gain access to new goods and power by wedding the Americans. For a time, a fluid, culturally hybrid society developed around places like Bent's Fort on



*"Justice of the Plains: The Movement Westward," by John Stuart Curry, in the Department of Justice, 1936. (Carol Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

the Santa Fe Trail, in what is now southern Colorado. There, the trader William Bent and his Cheyenne wife, Owl Woman, anchored a far-flung and remarkably diverse social and economic network. Through the gates of Bent's Fort flowed Bent's fellow traders and trappers (including Spanish and Mexican men and women), Owl Woman's Cheyenne kin and compatriots, Ute and Arapahoe and Pueblo people, and transients of all kinds, heading in every direction.

Bent's Fort was also a staging ground for American conquest of the Southwest, a process as much social as military. The US government had little use for the mixed and mobile society of the Southwest frontier. Instead, the nation pursued a policy expressly designed to promote white occupation of the continent; the spread of monogamous, male-headed, sedentary agrarian households; and a landscape of fixed fields and sturdy buildings in which (mostly white) women would labor for the good of their families. In 1862, Congress enshrined that vision of domestic order in one of the most influential laws in American history, the Homestead Act. This famed piece of legislation has long been celebrated as a hallmark of the dream of liberty and economic self-sufficiency for all Americans, but it was both more and less than that. The Homestead Act represented an attempt to settle one kind of family and un-settle others, to replace footloose frontiersmen (not to mention diverse Indian and Hispano families) with sober and industrious white husbands, wives, and children. Holding out the promise of free land, the government sought to supplant what many Americans saw as the reckless, restless West with order, predictability, and permanence. In the West of the Homestead Act, Americans would settle down, and women and men would know their places.

Despite the influence of gendered ideas on social life and even federal policy, the West offered women unprecedented opportunities to do what so many men did: to reinvent themselves. Even the Homestead Act provided for single women to claim land of their own, and thousands of women did just that. Others answered the desperate need for teachers in the West, and set out, all alone, to keep school in far-flung communities. Victorian women who took up farming or ranching or teaching in places far from their homes stretched the boundaries of their lives. But at the same time, they could claim, with justification, that they were simply fulfilling woman's natural duty to domesticate and civilize wild country.

Other women traversed the vastness of western spaces with desires distinctly at odds with those of Victorian gentility. Thousands migrated to boomtowns where miners and railroad workers craved lodging, food, and diversion, including sex. We should not romanticize the lives of the laundresses, waitresses, prostitutes, dance-hall girls, and other women who worked their way across the self-proclaimed Wild West. The most infamous of these, Calamity Jane, had a genius for inventing and embroidering her own legend as a cross-dressing, bull-whacking western hero. But she was also a woman who had been an abandoned and abused child, and she was often obliged to earn a hard living as a prostitute. By the end of her life, she had become a miserable, pitiful drunk, an object of ridicule, and a charity case.

But somehow, the legend of Calamity Jane lives on. And not every woman with a dream came to a bad end. For thousands of enterprising females, the Wild West afforded the opportunity to make some money, and even to claim unprecedented legal rights. In 1856, Bidy Mason, who had traveled to Utah and then to southern California as the slave of a Mormon convert, sued for and won freedom for herself and her daughters. For decades, Mason's home would be a center for the African American community of Los Angeles. African American entrepreneur and abolitionist Mary Ellen Pleasant followed the Gold Rush to San Francisco, where, like Mason, she continued to prosper and to work for freedom and civil rights for her people.

Who could have predicted that in 1869, the chaotic Territory of Wyoming, the harsh and windy home to Northern Cheyennes and Arapahoes, Shoshones and Crows, Utes, and even some Lakotas, would see

railroad workers, prospectors, and gold miners come to sweat out their livelihoods, drink up their wages, and elect a territorial legislature that gave women the right to vote for the very first time in American history? And who would have imagined that by 1900, only four states of the Union—Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho—would have enfranchised women? Notably, all four states were in the West. Indeed, prior to 1920, when American women won the right to vote with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, nearly all the states that allowed women to vote were west of the Mississippi.

In fact, the success of women's suffrage in the West was no accident. Partly in the effort to "settle" the American empire by attracting more white women to the West, western territorial and state legislatures enacted measures that led the way in numerous areas of women's rights, from women's suffrage, to equal pay, to child custody and divorce laws. And when it came to women actually holding political office and wielding political power, the West was far in the vanguard of the nation. The first woman to be elected to the US House of Representatives (Montana's Jeannette Rankin), the first woman governors of states (Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming and Miriam Ferguson of Texas), and the first woman mayor of a major city (Seattle's Bertha Knight Landes) all hailed from the West. Of the thirty-four women who have served in the US Senate, twenty-two have represented states west of the Mississippi. Today, the states of California and Washington are represented in the US Senate by all-female delegations.

In the American West today, women run cities, corporations, and day-care centers. They work in sweatshops, clean other people's houses, train for military duty, and fight wildfires. They play tennis and drive minivans and do laundry and shop for school supplies. Some of them get arrested. Some of them make the arrests. Some sit on judges' benches and some sit in the US Congress. Wherever you go, there they are. In ways often unacknowledged, with consequences often unanticipated, in measures large and small, women in the American West have made, and continue to make, western history and the history of the nation.

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