



## THE INVISIBLE SEX

### The Approach of Statehood Heightened Awareness of Women's Roles

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The role of American women in the decade of the 1880s has been described by social historians as "caretaking and nurturing inside and outside the home."

Family food preparation, clothing production and care of the sick were activities within the home. Technology had yet to lift even a portion of these burdens from women. In the Far West, where such qualities as initiative, resourcefulness and energy were applauded in the female gender, "women were extolled as mothers, wives and civilizers," in the words of historian Julie Roy Jeffrey.

If women's realm was the home and hearth, was this role reflected in that mirror of American life, the daily newspaper? What other women's roles "in economic, political and community life" were portrayed in contemporary newspapers? The answers are surprising for Washington Territory in 1889.

Analysis of news items from 55 randomly selected issues of daily newspapers in Washington Territory in 1889 shows that women were most often mentioned in the news in connection with five topics: (1) when accused, tried or convicted of crimes; (2) as the victims of crimes; (3) when they were involved in economic activities outside the home; (4) in women's suffrage activities; and (5) in social and community welfare projects. A comparative analysis of women in the news during the same period in New York, Portland and San Francisco shows a similar pattern.

The high percentage of news items about women involved with crime "either as the accused or as the victim" is the result of the American concept of news and the news reporting system. News by definition is the extraordinary, not the normal pattern of events. This precept makes reporters ignore what is routine.

News reporting efficiency depended upon assigning reporters to the sources - like police stations and the courts - that most often generated out-of-the-ordinary news. In addition, the popular cultural ideal of women as homemakers and mothers caused any involvement of women in crime to be judged "extraordinary." Such events were automatically news since they conflicted with the accepted role of women.

The arrest of Mrs. Minerva Allen in Tacoma on a charge of burglary in July 1889 illustrates the point. Not only was Mrs. Allen a woman burglar, but her toddler son accompanied her as a decoy and lookout. Mrs. Allen's arrest generated newspaper coverage in Tacoma and throughout the territory for what would have been a commonplace offense if perpetrated by a man. Another round of news coverage ensued when it was reported, "Mrs. Allen attempted to escape by scaling the eight-foot fence surrounding the jail yard. She climbed upon a box, let the

baby down on the other side and then jumped over herself." "Baby" Allen, as the newspapers called the child, remained in jail with his mother pending her trial, which resulted in her conviction. Then, it was off to the territory's Walla Walla prison for mother and child, where Baby Allen was expected to live with the county sheriff's family so that he could enjoy occasional visits with his convict mother.

Mrs. Allen's train trip from Tacoma to Walla Walla produced this further bit of newspaper pathos: "When night came and it was time to go to bed, Mrs. Allen, the notorious red-haired woman, had Baby Allen get down on his knees and say his prayers as usual. The scene was quite affecting, and several of the hardened criminals dropped a tear as they witnessed the simple manifestation of faith and innocence."

A frequent theme of news items involving women criminals was prostitution. Cities like Seattle, Tacoma and Spokane tolerated houses of prostitution. However, periodic raids and arrests of inmates, followed by fines levied against both inmates and madams, were routine. City fathers considered the fines the equivalent of a license fee, which they could not collect without acknowledging their own involvement in a crime. "Instead of breaking up the business altogether," commented Tacoma's *Ledger* after the sudden arrest of the city's prostitutes, "it has been the custom of the chiefs of police of Tacoma to periodically raid these houses and take their inmates before a justice of the peace, where their money is paid into the city treasury. A well-known citizen said last night that funds are probably wanted to clean streets, and 'the unfortunates' were compelled to whack up their share."

Women were most often the victims of crimes such as seduction, rape, or assault and battery by husbands or suitors. The occasional instance in which the male was the target of female violence aroused the "extraordinary news" precepts of the newspapers. Mrs. Charles Skeels, also known as Bronco Liz, wife of a Spokane saloon keeper, finally tired of her husband's dalliance with other women. She stalked him to a rooming house and punctuated their marriage and her husband's life with three pistol shots. Ultimately a jury acquitted her of the charge of murder. The Portland *Morning Oregonian* editorialized approvingly of a wife who armed herself with hickory sticks. She applied these so effectively to her drunken husband when he tried to beat her that he signed and observed the WCTU abstinence pledge. The *Oregonian* urged other women to follow suit if the circumstances were similar.

Women in 1889 found some equality before the law, but little in the economic sphere. The home was women's realm. "Oh, what a mighty influence heavenward" or the opposite "a mother wields in her home life," wrote the Spokane *Review*. If a woman pursued economic activities outside the home, the newspapers "written by and for men" largely ignored her efforts.

The field of entertainment was an exception. The largest number of news items about women's economic activities concern professional entertainers. Here, the male press agent became the intermediary who brought actresses, singers or equestrian performers into the news regularly. Theatrical advertising also may have helped to pave the way for the news coverage of these women.

Advertisements and indirect clues in news stories of accidents, business changes or crimes indicate, however, that economic activities of women outside their homes was substantial. Women practiced medicine in Washington's major cities. They operated restaurants, hotels and boardinghouses, as well as confectioneries, bakeries, dressmaking shops and millinery

establishments. A Spokane woman ran a saloon and a Tacoma woman operated a commercial greenhouse. A "responsible matron" in Spokane offered child care in her home and in Tacoma Miss M. Tracy Boehm conducted a private kindergarten.

As employees, women worked as sales and office clerks, teachers and nurses. Women outnumbered men students at the University of Washington because of their dominance in the "normal department" (teacher training). Women also worked at the traditional domestic tasks of preparing and serving food, cleaning and laundering, while employed as servants in the homes of those able to pay the \$20 to \$25 a month that a domestic worker commanded in 1889. They also performed similar work in boardinghouses, hotels and restaurants.

But their economic role outside the home was mentioned rarely unless an accident or some other occurrence turned it into news. For example' the Tacoma *News* revealed women's employment in commercial laundries in this follow-up news item after an industrial accident: "Yesterday noon, at the Tacoma Steam Laundry, Mrs. S. McGee took up a collection for Lena Reeves, the girl whose hand was crippled in a mangle Monday evening, and secured \$67 in about half an hour." Sadie Brantner, whose seduction case against an aspiring Tacoma politician became a major news event in 1889, was identified as a book saleswoman. A news story about postal service criticized a female postal clerk who objected when a male patron insisted on smoking his cigar while waiting at her window for his mail.

Unlike women's economic activities outside the home, women's work as charity volunteers was reported regularly in Washington newspapers, as well as those in the other major cities.

Social welfare in 1889 throughout the United States was essentially a religious, fraternal or volunteer community undertaking. Local governments offered minimal food supplies and medical assistance to individuals with established residence. County poor farms reluctantly harbored the elderly, the disadvantaged and the unemployable. Pierce County boarded its indigent and elderly at a local hospital for 80 cents a day. To reduce this expense the county, in 1889, planned to open a poor farm where residents could raise some of their own food.

Temporary assistance to the disadvantaged was the chore of women's organizations dedicated to providing aid to families, women and children. Typical of these groups was the Ladies' Benevolent Society of Spokane. The society sponsored charity events to raise funds, identified those in need and supervised the distribution of aid. Charity balls, strawberry socials and other events were regularly reported as news, as were the good works of the society. An annual charity ball at Spokane in December 1888 raised \$700 to \$1,000 "and furnished the sinews of war with which they can prosecute their great work of charity."

The Spokane society reported, "During the last year aid has been given in 110 cases, including many families - about 300 persons in all, and the receipts from all sources amount to \$860 to date, but it is thought that by the end of the year the total receipts will have reached an even \$1,000, nearly all of which will have been used in the work."

The Ladies' Benevolent Society provided the necessities and even paid for hospital treatment: "Money is never given to applicants, but they are supplied with food or clothing as their needs require." The society did not provide assistance to families in which able-bodied males were not working. Single males, able-bodied but indigent, were scorned as "tramps," and could look to no one for assistance. Law enforcement agencies jailed them under the vagrancy law or drove them out of town when there was no need for their labor as street cleaners on city chain gangs.

Strangely, it was news coverage of the women's suffrage debate in the territory in 1889 that provided the most revealing insights into women's role in the home. Supporters of women's suffrage in Washington glimpsed tantalizing opportunities in 1889, the year in which statehood became a reality for the territory. The necessity for a convention to create the new state's constitution created the forum in which suffragists could press for women's right to vote .

Nor was the suffrage issue new in Washington. In 1883 the Territorial Legislature had authorized women's suffrage, joining Wyoming and Utah among territories granting this privilege. Women's voting rights disappeared, however, in 1886 when the Washington Supreme Court declared the enfranchising act improperly drawn. In 1888 the legislature responded with a new women's suffrage act, but this was struck down by a lower court as unconstitutional on the grounds that the federal government had never authorized territories to enfranchise women.

Thus, Washington suffragists had twice enjoyed the euphoria of winning the legislature's approval of the right to vote; twice the courts had snatched away the hard-won victory. Nonetheless, women in Washington remained eligible to vote in school elections if they met the same voting qualifications specified for men.

Seven months elapsed between congressional authorization of a Washington state constitutional convention, February 22, 1889, and the election to approve or reject the constitution, October 1, 1889. These months produced a lively public dialogue on the questions of women's suffrage.

Despite their disenfranchisement by the territorial courts, a few Washington women attempted to vote in the national election of November 1888. This was possible because the territory had not adopted the Australian secret ballot. Ballots were printed and distributed by the parties and by the candidates. To obtain a ballot was no problem; the difficulty for women lay in having it accepted and counted.

Mrs. Zerelda N. McCoy, vice president for Washington of the National Woman Suffrage Association, tried to vote in a suburb of Tacoma but her ballot was deposited only with the election board's nonacceptance written upon it. "About a dozen women offered their votes at Gig Harbor and their ballots were accepted," according to the Tacoma *Ledger*. (See "The Nevada Bloomer Case," COLUMBIA, Summer 1988, for further reading.)

The National Woman Suffrage Association sent a team of campaign workers into the territory within weeks after President Grover Cleveland's approval of the Washington statehood bill in February 1889. There were three main objectives: to mobilize women in support of the suffrage campaign through meetings and rallies - no easy task; to work for the election of delegates known to favor women's suffrage to the constitutional convention, scheduled to start July 4, 1889; and to gather petitions urging the convention to include women's suffrage within the new state constitution.

Each of these produced news. For example, Mrs. Clara Colby, editor of the *Women's Tribune*, a Nebraska-based publication, talked to suffrage meetings in every county seat in Eastern Washington during a three-week swing. She was optimistic, she told the Tacoma *News*, that suffragists were making progress in seeing that constitutional convention delegates favoring women's suffrage were on the party tickets.

At North Yakima the technique for gaining signatures on the petitions for suffrage to lay before the convention was also news. As the Yakima *Herald* saw it, the suffragists were also preparing a

blacklist of businesses whose owners or managers refused to sign their petitions. "Whenever they failed to get a signer to the petition, [they] drew a blacklist and proceeded to put the name of the refuser upon it. Woe to the man who is blacklisted by our sisters, our cousins and our aunts. They need never again raise their heads for political preference."

The suffragists sought to focus the debate in the newspapers on the issue of political equality. Matilda Hindman, National Woman Suffrage Association leader, called women's suffrage "the principle of equal protection to all citizens." Opponents of woman suffrage, on the other hand, tried to shift the focus of the debate to women's role in society.

A series of letters, editorials and rebuttals appeared in Tacoma newspapers after Mrs. A. W. Mackey, the wife of a Presbyterian minister, declared that women's suffrage was opposed by "the better class of women in America. We do not wish it because we consider it to be a direct blow at the home." Mrs. Mackey explained that if women were to vote, then they should also stand for office. The result might be election. No woman, she said, could remain "the same pure, noble" person and mingle with the class of men who were on the Tacoma City Council.

Mrs. Mackey's defense of the home and virtuous womanhood shifted the suffrage debate from political equality to women's role. She expanded her theme in a published letter declaring that voting would only increase the burdens of women's work in the home. "I have been in many homes in all planes of life...and I have never seen a home where a mother's interest or time could be spared for the exciting, contaminating, degrading life of politics."

The conflict between women's suffrage and women's role in the home was neatly summed up by the editor of the *Tacoma News*: "The woman suffragists all over the country...are continuing the fight for citizenship with ever increasing vigor. The same amount of energy introduced into the kitchens of the nation would soon solve the much deplored evil of incompetent female help. Woman suffrage may be good in theory, but well cooked meals are better in practice. There is nothing more visionary than woman suffrage and nothing more practicable than our daily bread."

The Constitutional Convention, after a series of angry debates, decided to sidestep the issue and exclude women's suffrage as part of the constitution. Instead, it submitted the question as a separate ballot issue to the then all-male Washington electorate, which overwhelmingly rejected it.

The suffrage issue brought the role of women into greater relief in territorial newspapers, but it was still a strangely out-of-focus portrayal. Newspapers exaggerated the prevalence of women as victims or perpetrators of crime, and press agency also created a larger-than-life picture of women as entertainers.

Because there were few, if any, alternatives to the ladies' benevolent societies that funded and administered community social welfare, the importance of women in these activities may well have received the attention in print that it deserved. However, the newspapers were nearly silent on two other aspects of women's role: economic activities outside the home and their domestic service activities in the home. Anti-suffragist responses in the newspaper debate over women's suffrage provide an insight into the demands of household work women were expected to accomplish within the home. These present a view of women's role far more burdensome than the traditional caretaking and nurturing idea.

Perhaps the reality for most Washington Territory women in 1889 was closer to a Tacoma *Ledger* anecdote in which a farmer declared marriage a success. It was offered as humor but there was also an undeniable thread of truth in it. He explained that marriage had to be a success. His wife, he said, "milks six cows, gets breakfast and starts four children for school, looks after the other three; feeds hens, hogs and motherless sheep; skims 20 pans of milk, washes clothes, gets dinner, etceteray. Think I could hire anybody to do it for what she gits. Not much! Marriage, sir, a success, a great success."

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