

# LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

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## **STAKING THEIR CLAIM: Independent Spirit** **New book details 13 Nevada pioneer women who broke from convention**

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"More than Petticoats" shares the stories of 13 Nevada women who played important roles in the state's development.



Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (1844-1891), was a Paiute who tried to educate the wider world about American Indians.



Jan Cleere looked for a variety of women to include in her history book.



Maude Frazier worked to improve Nevada education.



Helen J. Stewart is known as the "first lady of Las Vegas."

Behind every great man, the saying goes, is a great woman.

But throughout Nevada's rich history, great women often did just fine on their own.

They were miners and prospectors, farmers and culture-spanning ambassadors. They were doctors and lawyers and political activists at a time when such trades weren't thought proper for women to pursue.

And even when they had jobs in teaching, church work and other female-friendly professions, they were tough enough to put any man to shame.

Jan Cleere loves them all. Better yet, she loves sharing stories about Nevada's pioneer women with others.

In her new book, "More than Petticoats: Remarkable Nevada Women" (\$10.95, The Globe Pequot Press), Cleere shares stories of 13 fascinating women from Nevada's past.

Some -- Helen Stewart, Maude Frazier, Sarah Winnemucca -- are well-known standards of any course in Nevada history. But Cleere also brings her vivid, conversational storytelling style to tales of several lesser-known, but no less interesting, Nevada women. Cleere, who lives in Oro Valley, Ariz., writes primarily about the Southwest and its history. Several of the women featured in the book represent relatively new literary territory, the author said in a recent telephone interview.

"Frankly, the Internet was a godsend," she said. So, she

added, were the Nevada Women's History Project and the Nevada State Library & Archives, as well as subjects' family members and others with firsthand knowledge about them.

Another pressing -- and, perhaps, more emotional -- problem was simply deciding who would and would not make it into the book.

Cleere said there were more than 100 prospective subjects on her initial list.

Cleere wanted to "make sure I had the entire state covered." Then, she said, "I wanted some cultural and ethnic diversity."

"And, I wanted women that were of different backgrounds. We always have our miners, but I wanted legislators, educators and artists. I was just trying to find a really good mix, and you just keep whittling down and then hope you've got the right combination."

The 13 women who made the final cut were born before 1900, spent most of their lives in Nevada and, in some way, "had an impact on the state," Cleere said.

The book includes a few easily recognizable names. There is, for instance, Helen J. Stewart (1854-1926), dubbed the "first lady of Las Vegas" and whom Cleere called "an absolutely marvelous woman."

Stewart operated a successful cattle ranch in a patch of desert that would one day become Las Vegas. She was an astute businesswoman who helped to organize the Mesquite Club and was the first woman elected to the Clark County school board. Stewart did not want to be here, Cleere said. Yet, after the death of her husband, Stewart was "able to turn her small ranch into a moneymaking program and knew to sell out when the railroad hit."

Even Nevadans who know the story of pioneering educator Maude Frazier (1881-1963) -- the first building on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas campus was dedicated to her -- will be fascinated by Cleere's portrait of the prim-but-tough educator rumbling through remote parts of Nevada in her car, taking education to children wherever she could find them.

"Can you imagine?" Cleere said. "Now we have roads. Those were not even roads she was following. She got into that car and took off because she had to find those kids."

The portrait of Frazier fits in with Cleere's desire to reveal the women "as individuals, as people -- what their daily lives were like and the difficulties they had to face."

Cleere devotes a chapter to Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (1844-1891), a Paiute woman who strived to serve as a sort of mediator between American Indians and Nevada's white settlers.

"Sarah *is* Nevada," Cleere says. "And, of course, this little tidbit is just a small portion of Sarah's life."

Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins died at age 48 and, Cleere says, "I really think she died of a broken heart more than anything else."

Why? "It was just that she could not do for her people what she wanted to do," Cleere says.

Cleere profiles Ah Cum Kee (1875 or 1876-1929), the first woman Chinese-American farmer in Nevada, who lived a hard life that included childhood abandonment by her parents and a lifetime spent bucking the constraints of both her native and adopted cultures.

Yet, she became a successful farmer whose net worth in 1910 was valued at \$1,000, Cleere said, "a lot of money at that time."

Felice Cohn (1884-1961) was the youngest person admitted to practice law in Nevada and the fourth woman from anywhere to be admitted to argue before the U.S. Supreme Court. She also served as assistant attorney general for Nevada. Yet, Cohn also was asked to serve as a court reporter because, Cleere wrote, it was considered a "woman's" job. Prompted, perhaps, by such societal stereotypes, Cohn became a notable voice in the women's suffrage movement.

After illness took the lives of her husband and three children, Idah Meacham Strobridge (1855-1932) ran her family's ranch and mined the Humboldt Mountains. Strobridge also loved books and opened an award-winning bindery. And, thanks to her love of writing, Strobridge became one of Nevada's first -- and one of its most recognized -- women writers.

Strobridge "had that gift of writing that every writer craves," Cleere said, and left behind volumes containing vivid, colorful descriptions of the desert she loved and the people inhabiting it.

Anne Henrietta Martin (1875-1951), a Stanford-educated former history teacher at the University of Nevada, Reno, developed a passion for women's suffrage during her travels in Europe and Asia.

She became a noted advocate for women's rights -- she once was arrested during a demonstration in England -- and, Cleere said, spearheaded the fight for women's suffrage in Nevada.

Eliza Cook (1856-1947) was one of Nevada's first woman doctors at a time when medicine was thought to be an improper profession for a woman.

Yet, Cleere said, Cook not only practiced medicine but "would go beyond what a (male) doctor would do."

After delivering a baby, Cleere said, Cook might stay around to wash clothes, cook and do housework for the family, knowing how important pioneer women were to their families.

Cook, who became involved in the temperance movement during her youth, also became active in the effort to give Nevada women the right to vote.

Cleere profiles the Daughters of Charity (1864-present), a Catholic religious order that ran a school, an orphanage and a hospital in Carson City.

Most nuns of that time "stayed behind their cloistered walls and waited for individuals to come to them," Cleere said.

The Daughters of Charity, in contrast, "hit the streets of Virginia City running," she noted. "They went out and found people who needed assistance."

Even today, Cleere said, "you can still see their fingerprints there."

By any measure, Alison Oram Bowers (1826-1903), who, with her husband, was one of Virginia City's first millionaires, was a character.

Mining made Bowers and her husband rich. Then, Cleere said, "she wanted to raise her status, and her only way of doing that, since she had all this money, was to purchase everything she could get her hands on."

When their finances soured, Bowers became a fortuneteller. She died broke, and her ashes were interred behind her mansion.

Mining is represented by two other profiles in the book: Ferminia Sarras (1840-1915), a Nicaraguan-born woman with a vague past, a penchant for young men and a knack for finding copper, and Josie Pearl (1873-1962), a miner who never struck it rich but was profiled by legendary journalist Ernie Pyle.

As different as they were, the women were "almost compelled" to seek their fortune in the desert, Cleere said.

"I don't believe either of them, after reading their stories, could have stopped mining. It was in their souls, and they just needed to go on to the next strike."

Washoe basket-weaver Dat so la lee (birth date unknown-1925) became famous for her artistry, thanks to a healthy assist from Abram and Amy Cohn, who owned a Carson City clothing store and weren't averse to telling a few tall tales to hike the price of her intricate baskets.

Cleere figures Dat so la lee went along with the Cohns, because she wanted to provide for her family. "She remained a very silent partner, literally, in that collusion with the Cohns," Cleere said.

"So, we don't really know what she thought of the stories they made up about her," Cleere added. "It was all just to promote her work, which was exceptional."

While the women come from widely varied backgrounds, they share "an independent spirit," Cleere noted.

"I'm sure they faced fears and challenges we can't even imagine," she explained.

"They didn't all live exemplary lives and some of them did not end up where they

hoped to be. But they struggled on, and at a time when women were not expected to do that."

Which woman became her favorite subject? "Don't ask me that," Cleere said with a laugh.

"These women became so personal to me. As I wrote each one, I really tried my best to walk in her footsteps."

"I honestly could not pick one," Cleere said. "I just love them all. They became my ladies. I really got close to them."