



August 24, 2008

Columnist Susan Snyder: Pioneers no longer overlooked

Mon, Jan 31, 2005 (8:09 a.m.)

It's not every day you hear about the nuns who helped shape modern Nevada.

We hear about the miners and the ranchers. We hear about the railroad men and the casino mavericks.

We've even heard about the women who, um, kept them all entertained.

But most of us haven't heard much about the Daughters of Charity, three 19th-century Catholic nuns who brought education, social services and eventually a hospital to Virginia City and the raucous environs created by discovery of the Comstock Lode.

"They were a group that didn't stay behind their cloistered walls. They went out and found people who needed help," said Jan Cleere, the Arizona author of "More than Petticoats: Remarkable Nevada Women."

The book, released this month by The Globe Pequot Press, costs \$10.95 and is available at Borders Book Shop, Barnes & Noble Booksellers or from Cleere's Web site, www.jancleere.com.

It is one in the publishing company's "More than Petticoats" series, which seeks to profile historically significant women in each of the 50 states.

Cleere's book profiles 12 Nevada women and the Daughters of Charity, shedding light on a population that struggled against the same rugged challenges Nevada presented to men, but with the added baggage of gender and racial biases.

It was hard to choose which women to include, Cleere said.

"There are a lot of (women) still standing in the wings waiting for me," she said of the women whose names were not included. "I tried to cover cultural and ethnic diversity and also cover the state the best that I could."

Many of the women lived in or around the Reno-Carson city area, as that was the first settled. But there is a chapter about Helen Jane Wiser Stewart, who persevered on her sprawling Las Vegas-area ranch after her husband died. And there is one about Ah Cum Kee, a Chinese woman who raised six children and much-sought-after stringless white celery in the heart of the desert near Hawthorne.

The Daughters of Charity, Cleere writes, left San Francisco in 1864 and plunged themselves into Virginia City where: "Gunfights made the streets perilous and unfit for respectable women and innocent children. Schools were almost nonexistent. Murder, illness, disease and abandonment left dozens of children destitute and homeless, begging for handouts at saloon doors, gambling halls and houses of ill repute."

Nevada's pioneering women were of different races, different backgrounds and followed vastly diverse paths. But all were independent, resourceful and stayed a course often obscured by adversity.

Cleere's favorite? Idah Meacham Strobridge, a Northern Nevada woman who loved Nevada despite the illness and winter that had stolen the lives of her husband and three children.

"Every time I wrote one, I had a (new) favorite," Cleere said. "But here was a woman who was left with a ranch she knew she couldn't run. So she set up a book-binding business in the middle of the desert."

Cleere is scheduled to talk about her book and sign copies March 20 at the Gardnerville Museum & Cultural Center. She also is making plans to visit Las Vegas before then, but details aren't set. Check her Web site for updates.

•