

lution. Honorary pallbearers included senators, Chief Justice Edward White, Associate Justice Joseph McKenna, and brother-in-law Albert Galen, Montana's Attorney General. Carter was buried in Washington's Mount Olivet Cemetery.

On the capitol grounds in Helena, tourists can see statues of Carter's old adversary, Wilbur Fisk Sanders, and of Thomas Francis Meagher, whose significance to Montana's history is slight compared to Carter's. There are no similar monuments to Thomas H. Carter. Memory of Carter faded quickly after his death, partly because the new population streaming into the state had little awareness of earlier political times, but also because the world had largely passed him by. Carter had not adapted

his political ideas to changing circumstances. In the Midwest and in Montana, he had witnessed growth from frontier conditions to settled communities under a system of political nurture, and it does not seem to have occurred to him that something more than free land and individual opportunity might be necessary for a just society. Nevertheless, he should not be forgotten.

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# Nannie Alderson's Frontiers—and Ours

by William Bevis

**A** *Bride Goes West*, a story of the 1800s told to Helena Huntington Smith in 1939, looks straight and flat. But it's rain-slick gumbo, crowned in the middle, soft shoulders and pits to each side. The book is a historian's delight; a first-person tale of southeastern Montana mainly from 1883 to 1889—from the buffalo to the railroad, barbed wire, and the winter of 1886-1887. But what did those events mean to Nannie? The book becomes a literary critic's nightmare: This is a reminiscence fifty years later, "as told to" someone else, and the "voice" of the book, the personality of Nannie that emerges from the book, strikes different people in very different ways. Students regularly divide into those who find her a heroine and martyr and those who find her whiny and weak. Meanwhile, we have no idea where Nannie stops and Helena Smith begins, or where the Nannie of 1939 has misrepresented the Nannie of 1889. So we can discuss *only* the "voice" of a text, not a person in time and space.

That is just the beginning of our slide down Nannie's road. To all of us (historians, general readers, critics of culture), the book is invaluable, even unique, in the information it offers. We *want* to find a way to trust it: Here is a memoir of the great years of change, of white homesteaders in the middle of Cheyenne lands, of a woman on the frontier, of a

western adventure that failed. We have so few documents that chronicle the 66 per cent driven off the land. We need to hear Nannie's story and understand who she was, why she was, and how she compares to other women with families on the frontier.

**I**t was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Nannie had been a lonely child in West Virginia, fatherless and abandoned by her mother to a grandmother's care. On a visit to relatives in Kansas, she met Walt Alderson, a tall, handsome cowboy. The year they were engaged, 1882, a best-selling book west of Kansas was James Brisbin's *The Beef Bonanza; or How to Get Rich on the Plains*. As the title implies, Brisbin and his audience imagined not homesteading, but a beef boom and quick profit. The West was being liberated (to take the colonial point of view) from its burdens of Indians and buffalo, while people were discovering that cattle could be wintered on the northern plains instead of trailed up from Texas in the spring. The old grass was still lush. Railroads were pushing in, linking from the south, east, and west in 1882 and 1883. Montana had been opened, as the Cincinnati

*Gazette* editorialized in 1882: “There a poor man can grow rich while a rich man can double or even treble his capital.” After a year or two on the plains, five-dollar cows were expected to sell for fifty dollars. The resulting “bonanza” mentality clearly imitated the values and expectations of the mining camps. The 1880s in Montana did not lure the yeoman farmer of Jefferson’s imagination. Nannie’s story reminds us that the beef boom was a cattle rush, a mercantile, not an agrarian, frontier.

To young Walt Alderson, who as a boy had run off from Kansas to Texas and had done his share of driving cattle, who had no money and a “wild reputation,” and who wanted to marry an eastern girl named Nannie Tiffany, Montana was the answer. *This* part of the story is Jeffersonian—the West functions as a classless society, in which an ambitious and energetic young man can “marry up.” In 1882, he came out to Miles City on one of the first trains, located a homestead, and went back to claim his bride. Her relatives “all thought the ranching business had a wealthy future.” The motivations and mythologies are perfectly clear; *A Bride Goes West* begins not with the huddled masses of Europe seeking new land, but with young people seeking wealth through speculation. Nannie and Walt came to get rich and get out:

We didn’t mind the hard things because we didn’t expect them to last. Montana in the early Eighties was booming just like the stock market in 1929, and the same feverish optimism possessed all of us. I believe the same thing was true of many other frontier communities. . . . We didn’t expect to live on a ranch all our lives—oh, my no! We used to talk and plan about where we would live when we were rich—we thought of St. Paul. It all looked so easy; the cows would have calves. . . .

To romantic primitivists such as Charlie Russell, Frederic Remington, James Willard Schultz, and Frank Bird Linderman, who all came out to Montana from the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s to escape from “contaminating civilization,” as Linderman called it, Nannie and Walt would have been the enemy. They represented not only white settlement, but also the westward advance of a European business and capitalist mentality that would exploit sacred space, the last retreat of the buffalo, grizzly, and God.

Nannie’s book, then, chronicles the beginnings of the modern West. By 1884, the buffalo had disappeared, the Indians had been forced by hunger to reservations and handouts, barbed wire was going up, and the railroad had arrived. Nannie and Walt were part of that change.

That year [1882, along the Tongue River] the buffalo were still so thick that Mrs. Lays had only to



Nannie T. Alderson

Courtesy of Nancy Ferguson

say: “Mr. Alderson, we’re out of meat”; and he would go out and find a herd and kill a calf, all just as easily as a man would butcher a yearling steer in his own pasture. Yet when I came out, one year later, there was nothing left of those great bison herds, which had covered the continent, but carcasses. I saw them on my first drive out to the ranch, and they were lying thick all over the flat above our house, in all stages of decay. So wasteful were the hunters, they had not even removed the tongues, though the latter were choice meat.

The summer after I came out [1884] Mr. Alderson killed the last buffalo ever seen in our part of Montana. A man staying with us was out fishing when he saw this lonesome old bull wandering over the hills and gullies above our house—the first live buffalo seen in many months. He came home and reported it, saying: “Walt, why don’t you go get him?” And next morning, Mr. Alderson did go get him.

It all happened quickly. On April 4, 1883, Nannie Tiffany and Walt Alderson were married in Union, West Virginia. Within hours they were on a stage-coach, then a train: Chicago, St. Paul, Mandan, Dakota, Miles City, Montana, “every other building was a saloon . . . a pretty hoorah place.” On April 17, just two weeks after they were married, they were on a stage out of Miles City, headed south for their homestead where Lame Deer Creek joins the Rose-

bud. The Aldersons had jumped right into the middle of the cattle boom.

That night we stayed at a second road ranch on the Tongue River. We had a comfortable room to ourselves with a good bed, which the hostess must have given up to us, since the ordinary accommodations consisted of a kind of bunk room which was occupied that night by fully fifteen men. They were all young, nearly all seemed to be Easterners, and they were all going into the cattle business. Next morning at breakfast we all sat at one long table, and they talked of nothing but cattle, horses and prices. Everyone, it seemed, was making fabulous sums of money or was about to make them; no one thought of losses; and for the next year my husband and I were to breathe that air of optimism and share all those rose-colored expectations.

One year. Not much of a honeymoon. So much happened to Nannie and Walt during that year, they were so young and energetic yet so enslaved to fate that it makes your head swim. They built their dream house and their herd, lasted the winter, and in March Nannie's first baby was born. That same day her house was burned to the ground by the Cheyennes. Unwittingly, the Aldersons had homesteaded in the middle of land promised to the Cheyennes by General Miles; witlessly, one of their hired hands took a shot—for fun—at Black Wolf, a man of considerable stature in the tribe, a man who had fought Custer and seen the southern exile. It was the end of starvation winter, the beginning of the first spring without buffalo. The Cheyenne world was falling apart; Nannie could not understand their response, and in ways she could not recover. Never again would she live so well. Never again would she have the same young dreams of freedom and easy wealth.

**W**ho was she? What really happened? The answers are not perfectly clear. Historian Clyde Milner has shown that contemporary *diaries* written on the frontier may be uneventful, but the *reminiscences* about those same days are full of Indians and hair-raising tales. Nannie's reminiscence is subject to memory's creativity. Furthermore, Nannie's story is "told to" Helena Huntington Smith, who was a sophisticated listener and writer quite capable of sculpting the materials herself. We seem to have a reminiscence in which Nannie, at eighty-two years old, revealed more than she intended, more than she was willing to face. To put it bluntly, she keeps saying the hardships are worth it, which may be true when she is looking back, while at the time she may have been crushed.

*A Bride Goes West* is so interesting because this is not the little house on the prairie, and reader

reaction varies from those who see Nannie as a brave prairie Madonna surviving incredible hardship to those who see her as a whining southern belle who could not, and did not, make it. In my classes, women of Montana pioneer descent have been Nannie's most extreme critics. So this story, in addition to documenting the open-range cattle boom, raises issues of gender-specific experience and reactions. It also touches to the quick our notions of what it is, and what it takes, "to pioneer in earnest," as Nannie called it after she and Walt had lost all illusions of getting rich enough to leave.

Certainly her life got worse after the house was burned in the spring of 1884. She came back from Miles City with the baby in the fall, and they built a new but inferior house over on the Tongue River, where they stayed for five years. In the spring of 1886, Nannie went east to visit family and have her second child. The trip was quite a luxury. The firm was borrowing at 18 per cent; beef prices were falling; they were no longer getting "fabulous offers" from rich easterners for their operation. Walt joined her in West Virginia that fall, and then reports of the winter of 1886-1887 began filtering back East. As soon as Walt figured they could reach the ranch—in March—they returned, across Dakota where houses were buried in the snow, then digging through drifts, day after day, the hundred miles in an open sled to the ranch. Nannie huddled beneath buffalo robes with two children, between the trunks, and couldn't help contrasting this trip with her first, four years earlier:

I was a girl then, and every little hardship was a game, but now it was all grimly serious.

Walt was a good rancher, had put up a lot of hay, and his strong cattle were better off than most. Yet it was still disaster. Across Montana, the frozen carcasses were piled. Three years of overgrazing had changed the range; not only the buffalo, but the buffalo grass was gone. Walt's partnership broke up, he and Nannie moved for the third time in four years, and then "I began to pioneer in earnest . . . no longer borne up by the belief that our trials were temporary." She was back to two rooms and board floors, now with two children, then three, then four. No cash. No trips. Four walls. "There were weeks, in our long winters, when I scarcely left the house except to hang clothes on the line." In the fall of 1893, ten years after coming West to get rich, Nannie and Walt gave up ranching and moved to Miles City. "How rejoiced I was at this decision!"

Just why they quit ranching we will never know; conditions were bad, but they were equally bad for those who stayed on the land. Certainly we can be sympathetic with Nannie. Her background could hardly have been worse as a preparation for home-



Courtesy of Nancy Ferguson

Nannie T. Alderson in 1936, greeting riders at her cabin on Eaton's Ranch in Wolf, Wyoming

steading. She had never farmed or worked. Her father died in the Civil War just after she was born. Her mother, a decadent and cold southern belle as Nannie portrays her, remarried when Nannie was four, and Nannie “kept an impression of being underfoot, and not wanted” at the wedding. Nannie’s continued resentment at her abandonment runs throughout the book. After the honeymoon her mother did not send for her child. Nannie visited her mother at her new home five miles away and then was sent back to live with her grandmother. Nannie makes clear that she could never please her mother; she also dwells on this in a way that indicates it still rankles. Nannie displays, apparently, two standard consequences of early abandonment: She resents the parent, yet paradoxically cannot outgrow a desire to seek her approval. So all of her life she is both rebelling, living a life of her own out West, yet still curiously concerned about what her mother would think and about how to please her.

The deteriorating economics and the daily strains of ranch life were taking a toll on Nannie. She is unusually harsh on herself about impatience and fatigue with the children, as if she had not been a good mother. As the strain of life increased, especially after the winter of 1887, she says her “outlook on life was affected.” She became more withdrawn and stoic, keeping her feelings to herself.

In the last fifty pages, before the move to Miles City where the story ends with Mr. Alderson’s sudden death, Nannie offers a tale of growing nervousness and discomfort. One cause was constant toothache, on top of everything else; one effect was fear of snakes and Indians, a fear unjustified by her own admission. Beyond that, all is arguable, but I keep finding, in as well as between her lines, a person

creeping toward the edge of breakdown, increasingly unable to cope with daily life. Most readers agree that the book moves toward a deepening crisis not just of poverty and work, but of psyche. Although she later became quite comfortable as the postmistress at Birney and lived on her children’s ranches, I believe she was one of those who was not cut out for the rigors and remoteness of homesteading and for whom the entire adventure—hyped by railroads, supported by government, touted by economists—was a personal disaster. Nevertheless, the homesteading mythology—even in 1942—forced her to recall those years as difficult but valuable. She did not, I believe, “find fulfillment between log walls,” as Helena Smith suggests in her introduction.

**N**annie’s book gives us some valuable and surprising glimpses of homesteading families in nineteenth century Montana. Her own occasional embarrassment at being western versus eastern, her sense of cultural inferiority, was not just a matter of her relation to her mother. She quite vividly recalls how widespread this sense of inferiority was:

I was struck by the number of people who thought it necessary to apologize for being in the West. With the first breath they would explain that they were, of course, out here for their health, and with the next they would tell you all about *who* they were, and how rich and important and aristocratic their connections were back East.

Apparently the classless and democratic West is an invention of those who stayed. It did not arrive from the East. The absence of status and the consequent emphasis on self-reliance produced the same

effect then as now. Montana children are often like city kids, "street-wise," in the sense that they are realistic, independent, not looking for others to take care of them.

One quite surprising and interesting remark in Nannie's book suggests that something like humility is at the center of Montana culture, in spite of frontier traditions of rugged individualism and "where there's a will there's a way." In the passage, Nannie describes the two people, Mrs. Rowland and Little Wolf, who most impressed her, because "they had one impressive trait in common," a "quiet resignation to 'the inevitableness of things.'" Their attitude is the opposite of frontier assertions of individual strength and will. She then goes on to say that their attitude helped her "keep my chin up' when things were hard." Then she apparently recognizes that believing life to be a bad lot, with nothing to be done about it, is heresy on the American frontier, and she fudges: "I don't want to be misunderstood; I wouldn't have exchanged my lot for that of any other woman on earth. But perhaps just because the rewards were great, the going at times was proportionately rough."

As a woman's book, presenting a woman's West, Nannie's account is both valuable and misleading. She gives a vivid picture of the burden of children, of washing and cooking in frontier situations, and most poignantly, of being excluded from the outdoors action down by the corral, where she felt the most interesting part of ranch work took place. She offers the classic opinion, voiced by T. R. Roosevelt, that Montana in 1884 was great for men and horses, but hell on cattle and women. Is that a terrible truth, or a terrible lie? Contemporary feminist historians disagree.

In using her book as a document, however, we must recognize that she was not well-suited to ranch work. A number of older women have told me they are amazed at all the help Nannie got in the kitchen from the cowboys, and they are appalled that the men had to run a ranch without ever leaving her alone. She seemed willing to play the helpless female. Unlike many female pioneers, she had no work experience and was used to being waited on. Many women find her account maddening exactly because it plays to sexist expectations of women as a kind of fifth wheel on the frontier, when in fact many women were more useful, more physical, and happier in their work than Nannie. Compared to Elinore Stewart of the memoirs and of the movie "Heartland," Nannie is something of a belle. But then, Elinore was a widow cooking for a railroad crew before she came to Montana. And as her son Clive made clear at the 1988 Western Literature Association meeting, she was also an unusual woman, remarkably tough and happy.

Recent research indicates that ranching women were quite free and "western." In turn-of-the-century Colorado, for instance, there was "gender crossing" in ranch roles, the children were more free than eastern children of stereotypes, the literary societies—all male in the East—were mixed, the Grange and the Farmers Alliance had strong women, and the countryside supported suffrage for women. On the other hand, wealthy mining camps often preserved sex roles, at least for the rich. In Virginia City, Montana, in 1870, of 103 women, 95 were "keeping house" and 76 had children. In Teresa Jordan's recent book, *Cowgirls*, one gets a fine picture of western women who were and are integrated into a supposed "man's world."

The place of women on the frontier is now receiving a good deal of attention. One conclusion is that the West was a working-class frontier, and those with working-class expectations could handle it best. The desperate accounts of mining camps are often from genteel women; similarly, genteel women were more likely to have been "dragged" west, resenting it, while the poor looked forward to opportunity. Certainly, Nannie was ill-prepared for work. The frontier, past and present, seems to have offered to those ready for work a rare equality of the sexes and a remarkable number of strong, independent women.

One other consideration may put Nannie's story in a different light. It is easy to look down on her willingness to play the belle, but Melody Graulich's excellent work on violence against women on the frontier makes it clear that many frontier women were servants and victims of tyrants, often drunk and failed tyrants, in remote coulees, and that these women had no recourse in public opinion or law. With severe mistreatment of indentured women as an alternative, with no vote and no property in one's own name, it is easy to imagine a woman gladly mounting the pedestal. Being treated as an ideal of purity and grace seems to have been partly the flip side of a coin.

So here is one report from the mythic West. In Nannie's ten years of ranching, the buffalo disappeared, the Indians starved, the railroad and the barbed wire came, and the market crashed. The winter of 1886-1887 blew the pieces into corners, where many lodged to become founding families of Montana. Her old West was wild and free, but much of the wildness was in the market, and the free were often alone. It was a beginning, for Montana, that finally rewarded not European dreams of open space where "a poor man can grow rich," but endurance.

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