

Montana Episodes

Montanans at Work: Businesswomen in Agricultural Communities

by Laurie K. Mercier

Lured by promises of free land and bountiful harvests, tens of thousands of people settled in Montana east of the Rockies during the early decades of the twentieth century. As the number of farms and ranches increased, towns sprouted, usually along railroad lines, and businesses rapidly appeared to supply the needs of outlying residents. Women generally had limited economic prospects, but many found greater opportunities in town than on a farm or ranch, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, two particularly difficult decades for Montana agriculture.

Hundreds of oral histories that portray the lives of those working women were collected for the "Montanans at Work" oral history project sponsored by the Montana Historical Society between 1981 and 1983. The narratives reveal how women acquired the necessary skills to be secretaries, waitresses, cooks, clerks, teachers, laundresses, and seamstresses, and how often they were the major, sometimes the only, contributors to their families' financial survival.

The reminiscences here describe the experiences of Nell O'Brien O'Malley, Ida Duntley, Lillian Nelson Kitzenberg, Fern Harshman, and Eva Sullivan who came to Montana from the Midwest when they were young and who worked in or started small businesses in eastern Montana between 1915 and 1959. Early on, they homesteaded or helped their families operate farms and ranches. Difficulties associated with living on the land, however, convinced them



Lillian Kitzenberg, Plentywood, Montana

Lillian Nelson with her younger sisters at a table in their parents' restaurant in Dooley, Montana



Tom Mulvaney, East Helena, Montana

Geraldine, Montana, about 1915

to seek jobs in nearby towns to earn cash for their families. Three of the women eventually opened their own businesses, a fourth ran a business with her husband, while the fifth married into her employer's family and continued working in the family's shop.

Nell O'Brien came to Montana with her mother from Columbus, Ohio, in 1908 to cook on her uncle's ranch near Big Sandy. Four years later she married Steve O'Malley, and the newlyweds moved into the Shamrock Hotel in Big Sandy where Steve worked at the general store. Nell O'Malley completed high school and began to fix her neighbors' and friends' hair. She explained, "I just used to like to do it, I guess. I'd do anybody's hair that would ask me!" In 1925, while visiting her husband's relatives in Chicago, she decided to enroll in a beauty school. Returning to Big Sandy, she obtained a Montana manager's license and opened her own beauty salon in a downtown office building. Hers was the first salon in Big Sandy. "There was no such thing," she said, because until then, "nobody had their hair done in the town."

Realizing it would take time to build a clientele, O'Malley worked at the high school as a stenographer for two years and ran her shop at night. "I'd go down to the shop from the school and work in the shop from four to eight or nine o'clock,"

she remembered. "Sometimes it got to be longer than that. That's why I quit the stenographer work and went into the shop altogether then. I got people coming, you know, they hadn't been coming before." Asked about attracting customers, she exclaimed, "Oh heavens, just people telling other people." O'Malley operated her business until she and her husband left for the West Coast in 1943 to take more lucrative jobs in booming war industries.

Ida Duntley did not come to Montana "willingly." Her husband had family near Fort Benton and was anxious to homestead. Consequently, Duntley and her children left North Dakota to homestead in Choteau County where she "didn't know anybody." She added, "I was pregnant again, and I was just so lonely." Her husband soon "pulled out," leaving Duntley alone with her small children. She had nothing, but she struggled to keep the homestead. She cooked for threshing crews and managed to prove up on the homestead claim only to lose it to indebtedness.

Duntley's experience as a waitress in North Dakota helped her find work in a Great Falls cafe where she "just worked all the time" to support herself and her daughters. She moved to Geraldine, twenty-five miles southeast of Fort Benton, in 1916 because she thought that a small town would be an easier place

to raise children than a city. "You can take better care of them in a small town," she said. "That's why I started to work in Gerald[ine]."

Duntley worked in a restaurant that Frank Nakashima and his family owned and operated for several years in Geraldine, and she remembered the pleasant working relationship she had with them. "They was really nice people, those Japanese. Frank Nakashima was the boss. . . . He had the big business of the town." Business was brisk. Duntley recalled:

Geraldine was booming in 1916. We really had business then. You didn't get to sit down like they do today, I'm telling you. . . . There was other restaurants, all right there in Geraldine, but Frank got the business. They were all Japanese, they had the Japanese cook, all the help in the kitchen was Japanese. . . . Frank himself, he and I did all the dining room work. They were well-liked. . . . I've never worked for a nicer person than that Frank Nakashima.

Eventually the Nakashimas returned to Japan, and Duntley tried working for other restaurants in town but was disappointed with their management. She "took it as long as I could," then quit. Despairing of her future employment prospects, she decided to establish her own business. "I had no more idea what I

was going to do," she remembered. "I had no money, I had no job, and I had two kids in school, and what was I gonna do? And I sat down and started to think. Now, I know what I'll do. I'm just gonna take in some boarders." Duntley credited community support for helping her enterprise succeed:

I had been there so long, you know. I don't think they came to me because they thought they were gonna get better food—now I know that—but they felt sorry for me. They knew the predicament I was in. Everybody in town knew that . . . I lived [in a rented three-room house] clear up behind the schoolhouse. . . . I couldn't expect people to walk clear up there to eat when they can get something to eat right downtown. But I didn't have sense enough to realize that. Anyway, I got all stirred up, and I ordered groceries, and I put an ad in the paper [that] they can eat at my place at a certain time. And you would be surprised to see the people that came up there to eat.

She added that "all through winter, three months, I served people two meals a day way up back of the school." By spring, customers asked why she did not move downtown? "So I did. I moved my restaurant downtown."

Lillian Nelson was born in Iowa, but she moved west with her family to homestead in North Dakota as a child. In 1912, the Nelson family moved farther west to Montana, the "land of promise," where her aunt ran an inn in Plentywood. Nelson's father bought a restaurant in Dooley, and her mother cooked, her brothers washed dishes, and she waited tables. Her father then opened a "racket," or five-and-dime store, and homesteaded east of Plentywood. Nelson held various jobs in Plentywood, including working at cafes and for a laundry, and she contributed her wages to her family.

In 1919, Nelson was hired to work as a store clerk for her future mother-in-law, Mrs. Kitzenberg. The position offered some prestige for a working girl. She recalled how her

mother had hoped she might work at Kitzenberg's to learn a skill and earn better pay: "My mother used to say, 'Oh, I wish you could work for Mrs. Kitzenberg. She is a milliner, and you could learn to trim hats.' I used to trim hats at the dime store, straw hats, and I'd put ribbons here and there and think I was a milliner, too. My mother got her wish!" After Mrs. Kitzenberg's death in 1936, Lillian Nelson Kitzenberg and her husband operated the store.

Fern Harshman and her family came to Montana from Indiana in 1927, stopping first in Lewistown where her husband and older sons harvested wheat. Harshman pawned her wedding ring for the money to continue on to a farm the family had purchased near Chinook. Montana farming not being what they expected, the Harshmans soon moved to town. While her husband worked in the sugar factory, Harshman took in laundry and sold baked goods.

During the depression thirties, Harshman supplemented the family income selling magazines and



Harry Hale Buckwalter, photographer, Colorado Historical Society

Early beauty shops, similar to today's salons, offered women a place of their own to read or share the latest news while enjoying a shampoo and a set.



Lillian Kitzenberg, Penitwood, Montana

Leland Kitzenberg, Lillian's husband, is surrounded in their shop by fashions for ladies including several styles of cloche hats worn by women coast-to-coast in 1922.

furniture polish. Someone at the post office recommended her for a sales position with the California Perfume Company, and she borrowed five dollars from her stepson to pay for her first batch of products. "The first order I sent in," she said, "I paid it off." In such a way did she begin a fifty-year career as a representative for what later became the Avon Company. Harshman attempted independent sales work because she "thought it'd be better than trying to take in washing and everything like that, which it was. . . . You don't know what you'll do when you get up against a thing and you've got family to feed. You'll do anything."

Harshman's first years in business were not easy. "I walked for five years before I ever had a car," she said. "Walked to the country, and I walked down to Zurich, and that's nine miles, but I'd usually get a ride." She laughed as she remembered getting a ride home

from Zurich with Herman Cooper, the local undertaker. "He stopped with the hearse and he wanted to know if I was afraid to ride with him. I says, 'No, but I guarantee you one thing, it'll be the liveliest corpse you've ever hauled!' So I rode to Chinook in the hearse." Trudging from house to house on foot with her products was tiresome, but Harshman said she had "a little express wagon to carry the orders in when I'd deliver."

Eva Sullivan came to southeastern Montana in 1915 with her parents to homestead near Volberg. At eighteen, Sullivan began teaching in rural schools. She continued to teach after she married in 1929, but when her children reached school age, she decided not to instruct them in her own school. When approached by Mrs. Christenson of the McMahon store in Broadus to help clerk, Sullivan laughed at first, then thought, "Why

don't I? We need money so desperately, why don't I go down there?" So I went down and I said, 'Well, I'll help you out through this Christmas rush.' And I was there seven years."

Sullivan was supposed to be a clerk, but a small-town grocery required her to do a variety of jobs. "Of course they didn't have any box boys or anything, so I did everything, box boy, fill shelves, behind the counter. I did everything that came my way." She drove six miles from her ranch to Broadus through the 1940s, but in 1951, at least partially because of her experience at McMahon's, she and her husband purchased the Broadus Mercantile, which they and their son operated almost twenty years.

These five women left farming and ranching because they preferred work in town or because of economic necessity. Lacking other options for making a living and preferring the

independence of ownership, they ran their own businesses. The life of a businesswoman was hardly easier, however, than farming or ranching. A town's growth and stability often were linked to the proximity of a railroad or to status as a county seat, but its economic health ultimately depended upon the vitality of surrounding farms and ranches. Isolation and dry spells were particularly hard on those who settled in eastern Montana. Falling prices combined with drought after World War I to produce consistently hard times throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The toll was heavy on homesteaders and owners of small-town businesses alike and required long hours for what were often meager rewards.

For O'Malley, the work revolved around the schedules of her customers. "We worked all hours . . . went to work at seven o'clock [a.m.] and many, many a night we never quit till two in the morning."

Teachers, she said, did not want their hair styled in the daytime. "They wanted to be worked on at night. So that's how we had to work. . . . We'd do one [person] at about seven o'clock [p.m.] and work until eleven or so, then another would come later. . . . Many a day I never sat down all day long. I had a little table that I pushed around, you know, with my supplies on it to work with. I'd have a malted milk and a sandwich brought in, and I'd eat it while I was working standing there. No wonder I have trouble with my leg now!"

Like O'Malley, Duntley remembered working long hours—twelve hours a day, seven days a week, as a waitress and cafe owner. "I came to work at seven o'clock in the morning. I'd start right in waiting on people, cranky and all. . . . I don't know how else to describe the day other than you worked all the time." Sullivan's day also began at seven o'clock. "We worked as long as there

was . . . a customer coming and going." Hunting season put additional pressures on the family business:

For about two weeks every hunting season, we worked about eighteen hours a day, [my husband] and I, not our help, because we cut, wrapped, and froze deer. After the regular hours we worked with the deer. We worked! . . . [We were] open six days a week, sometimes seven. We'd go to church and come home and change our clothes, and we'd go down to the store, and we worked steady all the time. We weren't supposed to be open, but if somebody would come and rap on that door, well, of course you'd have to go see what they wanted—"Well, could I get this or that." First thing you know they'd have quite a little order picked up.

The demanding pace proved too much for some women. A single mother, Duntley realized she would



Eva Sullivan, Broadus, Montana

After stocking up on groceries and other goods or waiting for family members to finish shopping, farmers and townspeople traded gossip and lounged in the sun in front of the Sullivans' general store in Broadus.

not be able to continue her restaurant. "I did well . . . but you can take just so much. I just had to work such long, long hours. All the responsibility, I just couldn't hardly stand it. It just got me down, that's all." After a few years she quit the restaurant business. She had some experience cutting hair and ran a beauty shop in Havre for awhile with her daughter before opening a shop in her home in Geraldine. In the 1930s, she was hired as matron and cook for the high school dormitory in Geraldine. Six years later she switched to school lunch cook and finally had her evenings free. "Then I could go home at night, and that was easier. I didn't have the responsibility of the [dorm] kids. All I had was the responsibility of the cooking."

In addition to working and managing their businesses, women also were responsible for family care. Describing the duties required of her at home, Harshman said, "I done all my washing and ironing and got all my bread baking for a big family. I had sometimes as high as twelve sit down at the table at once. And I seen the day where I didn't know really where the next crust of bread was coming from, but I managed." Harshman "raised gardens" and harvested produce from friends' gardens in the country. "I'd get it ready and can it, and many a time I worked after midnight. One year I canned over five-hundred quarts of stuff." Selling Avon products allowed her the flexibility to care for a large family. Mornings and afternoons proved most convenient for selling and left evenings free for housework. "That's what broke me from working out at night. I got to have some time to get my own [house]work done." Such work and household schedules allowed little time for social or community activities. The Sullivans occasionally held card parties with friends, "but we didn't do any dancing; we were on our feet enough."

Small-town businesswomen had to adjust to the daily, seasonal, and economic rhythms of agriculture. Most of eastern Montana was hard hit by the depression of the 1930s, but Plentywood and northeastern Montana were doubly hurt by

drought and low prices. Lillian Kitzenberg described how her family's clothing store was disabled by the lack of money in the area. "It was hard times, very hard times. I remember when I was working at the store, and the government was giving a penny a tail for gophers . . . all the people around were going out and killing gophers, and I wanted to go so bad [to earn some money]. Business was very poor. . . . We couldn't hire help, because we just couldn't afford it with no money coming in. . . . Nobody had anything."

If farmers and ranchers "got plenty," Harshman remembered, they would "put in a nice order," but that did not always happen. "[It] depends on what they got in their pocket." Nonetheless, she said, "I've lost very little money all through those years," although it was "the thirties and forties when it was the worst. People want those things but when it came time to pay for 'em it was a different story." Sometimes people traded goods for Avon products. "I'd get eggs, or a dressed chicken, something like that," she recalled.

Like many small-town grocers, Sullivan adapted to an irregular cash flow by extending credit. "People didn't have money all the year round. In the fall when they'd ship cattle and . . . grain, well, then they had money. And they would charge, and most of 'em paid by the month, but we had some huge grocery bills," some of which, she said, rose to two- or three-thousand dollars before they were paid. "It wasn't easy to finance people like that, but we knew those people and knew we'd get our money. . . . People in this Powder River country are honest, most of them."

Businesses were busiest when ranchers and farmers came to town to take children to school, negotiate transactions at the courthouse or bank, or sell and ship livestock and grain. The week had its busy and slow days. "Monday, people were bringing their kids back to school, so it was always busy," Sullivan recalled. "They were coming for their children on Friday to take them home for the weekend, so that made Thursday a slow day. . . . Friday was

the heavy day, more than Saturday."

Most of O'Malley's customers were married women in town, high school girls, and farm women. Her reputation for fixing hair was widely known, and her long residence in the community helped her business. "I knew everybody around there for miles around Big Sandy, on both sides, out on the prairie and toward Great Falls and toward Havre and out south and east." People came to her shop from "as high as thirty miles out," she remembered. "I had one woman who was bald headed, and I used to wash her wig and set it for her and put it on for her. She was thirty-five miles out."

Most of Harshman's Avon customers also were women, and she always sold products to them in their homes. "Mothers are usually the ones that buy," she said, but "for their husbands, too." Some of her best customers were women who worked in town or farm women. Her first sale was to a Mrs. Charmin in Chinook. "She was a widow woman, and she took in washing and things like that, but still she bought from me."

Lillian Kitzenberg's customers were "working girls," employees of the Sheridan County courthouse and Plentywood offices. She believed these women had better-paying positions than clerks, waitresses, and farm women, because "they came in and paid those prices" for ready-to-wear clothing. Especially in the 1930s, farm women rarely could afford to purchase clothing from Kitzenberg's, but the store was a gathering place for them while they waited for their husbands to finish town business.

Grocery stores like the Broadus Mercantile catered to ranchers and townspeople. Of the big orders received monthly from larger ranches, Sullivan said: "We always enjoyed filling those great big orders, that was fun. . . . We'd sell pickup loads, just back up there and we'd just take boxes out until we'd fill that pickup box full of groceries." She said that when ranchers came in with their orders, "they had their list written out on a big, long strip of paper. . . . Sometimes they'd hand it to us and ask us to put it up, and sometimes they'd help. They'd tear

their strip in two and give us part of it, and they'd take part of it, and they'd help put up the order." For townspeople, the grocery store provided daily delivery. Before telephone service, "a lady would make out an order," Sullivan added, "and send some child" to the store with it.

Women in early twentieth-century rural and small-town Montana cared about beauty and did not think of hair appointments and Avon products as extravagances. Asked if a hair appointment was considered a luxury, O'Malley responded, "Oh, goodness no. I charged fifty cents for a hair cut, fifty cents for a hair set, and fifty cents for a shampoo." Women in Big Sandy and Chouteau County believed their appearance was worth such expenditures. "They didn't wear short hair those days, boy, and I tell you now it was something to do their hair," O'Malley continued. "They had it marcelled down and the ends in curls." To fix someone's hair, she said, took "about three-quarters of an hour. Some with a lot of long hair I'd take an hour." Pincurls, she explained, were "one of the first things we had to learn to do in hair work. Cut hair, then learn to pincurl first, then to marcel, and then to permanent wave."

O'Malley updated her training when new styles became popular. "I did marcls mostly at first. Then I went back to Chicago again and took up permanent waving. And then I bought a permanent wave machine after I learned to do the permanent waves and had it sent out." To keep up with the latest fashions, O'Malley said she relied on pictures. "We used to get folders from the permanent wave people and from the finger wave people . . . to show us the new styles. Then we'd try to follow them as near as we could."

Although women desired some luxuries, Harshman's customers were less interested in Avon's perfume and beauty products than in practical domestic items. "Those days they had [vanilla, lemon, and almond] extract, and they had food colorings, baking powder, Mothocide." Harshman had no trouble selling cake pans, either. "I sold I don't know how many of those

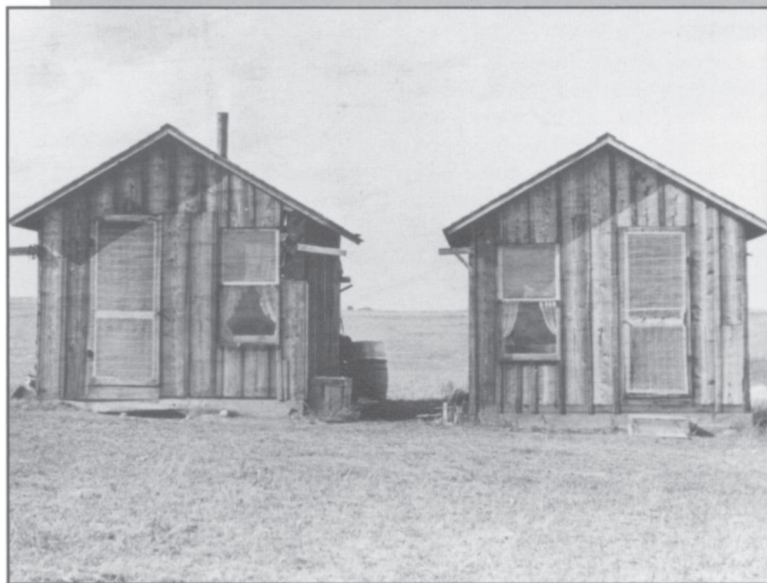
. . . you could carry a nice big angel food in it." Shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrushes, talcum and bath powders, laundry crystals, cologne, lipstick, and cold cream also were popular. "They might buy some lipstick, but that was about it. They didn't hardly ever use nail polish back then." She added, "I got to selling more rouge all the time, too. . . . And soaps, I sold an awful lot of soap, hard soap . . . and bubble bath. I could sell so much bubble bath. That came in the early forties."

The stories of these women illuminate a chapter about working women in the history of Montana's business and agricultural communities. These women identified needs in their communities, then created businesses to serve those needs and, in the process, provided a more secure living for themselves than they might have had otherwise. Despite the long hours, they enjoyed their work and believed that hard work, familiarity with the community, and a small-town environment helped them succeed. Those like Duntley were driven by the need to survive. "In my mind I knew I had to do it," she said. "I knew I had to make a living." Others

like Sullivan viewed their businesses as practical investments as well as alternatives to struggling in agricultural pursuits.

Whether they established their businesses through luck, skill, default, family connection, or determination, these women all appreciated the relative independence their enterprises allowed them. And they took pride in what they did. Duntley was attracted to the restaurant trade because "I understood people for one thing, and I had worked in restaurants since I was a kid. I knew what they wanted. . . . You've got to know how to treat people." Harshman developed her sales business because she liked meeting people, having flexible hours, and maintaining her health by walking outdoors. She was a self-taught salesperson: "Nobody ever showed me anything, never did. Just done it on my own, and I loved it, too."

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MHS Photograph Archives

Though working in town meant long hours and hard work, women often had more opportunities than they had on homesteads and living in shacks like these in Chouteau County.