Women Prospectors in the Gold Rush: Profiles in Courage

By Sally Zanjani

When we think about prospectors, we usually picture a bearded, weather-beaten man in a battered hat with pick and pan. It's a source of astonishment to most people when the weather-beaten figure under the hat turns out to be a woman. Indeed, the response I often hear is, "Women prospectors! I didn't know there were any!"

Eight years ago I started work on my book on women prospectors. I'd come across a handful of them while researching my history of Goldfield, Nevada, I accepted the verdict of other historians that the woman prospector was a rare anomaly, and I thought this would be a short and easy book. Maybe writers often have this illusion when they're beginning a new project.

I could not have been more wrong. Before I finished, I'd uncovered nearly 80 women prospectors and another twenty women physically engaged in mining who probably prospected, and I'm convinced that this was only the tip of the iceberg— perhaps a third of what was out there. It was a lost piece of women's history that showed me the most exciting group of women I've ever come across. I've told their stories in my book *A MINE OF HER OWN: WOMEN PROSPECTORS IN THE AMERICAN WEST 1850-1950.*

The woman prospector was an unusually difficult subject to research because little about it had previously been published and the information was often fragmentary—for instance, a brief newspaper item stating that Mrs. McCarthy, "who is famed as a woman prospector made a rich strike at Barber Canyon, Nevada"—and that's the last we ever hear of the famed woman prospector. Sometimes a photo like the one labeled "Mrs. C.D. Preble, a most successful prospector of Alaska and Nevada" turns up—but that's all I know about Mrs. Preble.

Even today, when popular consciousness of women's capabilities has grown by quantum leaps, the very idea of women prospectors evokes astonishment based on the belief that the prospector's life scarcely fits with anything we believed about women or women believed about themselves in the century from 1850 to 1950. Of course, it was widely known that women on the mining frontier might pursue occupations that couldn't be mentioned in polite society, but the respectable woman's life was severely circumscribed by those two powerful 19th century currents of thought, the "cult of true womanhood" and the "doctrine of separate spheres." She might be a lovely ornament, not a woman prospector who worked hard with her hands and was obviously proud of it. Woman's destiny was to marry and devote herself to the home, where she would provide a refuge for her husband from the crass, materialistic, ambitious world of men and nurture her children, inculcating them with virtue. She would civilize the frontier through her insistence on correct behavior. She would bring churches, even if they were only tent churches, where only saloons had formerly held sway.

Mining was presumed to be a masculine occupation, and while a few jobs might be suitable for women, maids, laundresses, cooks, teachers, telephone operators, and the like, mining was definitely not one of them. Even today, people find it difficult to imagine the woman prospector at work on her claim, pounding her drill into the recalcitrant quartz with an eight-pound sledge, igniting the blasting powder, shoveling away the rock fragments, and sometimes packing out ore samples on her back.

You can readily see that to break through these

powerful constrictions on woman's appropriate behavior the woman prospector had to be a person of unusually strong character. How these women got started prospecting was one of the more interesting questions I dealt with. In some cases they began as wives working with husbands or as girls assisting fathers. A good example is Ellie Nay, who learned prospecting from her father and brothers. One spring morning in 1909 she threw off her sunbonnet and raced through the sagebrush to show her husband the shining gold rock she'd wrapped up in her apron. The result was a small gold rush at Ellendale.

However, a more common scenario than learning from male relatives was the grown woman who became fired with the idea of hunting mineral from listening to the stories of prospectors. Boarding house keeper or restauranteur frequently shows up as the previous occupation of a woman prospector. The well known Nellie Cashman—the only woman prospector famous enough to become a U.S. post card—was one of these. And of course boarding houses and restaurants brought these women in contact with prospectors and their intriguing stories.

Dance hall girl also appears as a previous occupation—and for much the same reason. Fannie Quigley, a fixture for many years in the Denali area, had earlier been a dance hall girl in Dawson. Matilda Wales was said to be another Dawson dance hall girl turned prospector. Her reputation for skillful prospecting led an investor to engage her to stake claims for him when the rush to Chisana began in 1913.

The journey to this place deep inside the present Wrangell-St. Elias National Park must have been extraordinarily difficult, even by the rigorous standards of Alaska. If Matilda had not been somewhat shocking by the standards of the day, as the common-law wife of prospector William James and reputedly a former dance hall queen, she might have received the adulatory press coverage accorded to Nellie Cashman, the virginal "frontier angel," and we'd know more about her than we do.

Once this fascination with prospecting took hold, it lasted. As Robert Service, who understood the prospector mind set well, has written:

"For once you've panned the speckled sand and seen the bonny dust,
Its peerless brightness binds you like a spell;
It's little else you care about;
you go because you must,
and you feel that you could follow it to Hell.
You'd follow it in hunger, and you'd follow it in cold;
You'd follow it in solitude and pain;
And when you're stiff and battened down,
let someone whisper 'Gold,'
You're lief to rise and follow it again."

And often prospecting lasted through many years of scant success. Frances Muncaster's career in mining was one of the longest I found. She continued for some 50 years after she first followed the Klondike gold rush with her husband, and nearly 30 of them, including some very lean years, went by before she finally found something good at Squaw Creek north of Haines. Indeed, mining careers of 20 and 30 years were common among the women prospectors, and once they took up mining, very few ever left it. This suggests one of the other qualities of the women prospectors—eternal optimism. As one friend said of woman prospector Josie Pearl, "She got up every morning believing firmly that she was going to hit the Mother Lode."

Something that often mystified reasonable people was the prospector's propensity to pull up stakes and abandon a pretty good claim when a mining excitement erupted somewhere else. Often hindsight showed that sticking with the abandoned claim would have been the wiser financial decision. However, we're not talking about rational choices here. As the daughter of woman prospector Anna Rechel has told me, "It was a dream and a story. They had to go."

For many, an added element was the electric excitement in the thronged streets of the mining boom towns in the midst of a rush. Many were also drawn by the camaraderie of old friends in the mining crowd, a nomadic tribe that reassembled at one boom after another. This factor clearly influenced Nellie Cashman's appearances at mining booms in Pioche, Nevada; Tombstone; Kingston, New Mexico; the Klondike; and the Koyukuk region—these in addition to her prospecting activities in many other locales.

Probably another facet in the nature of the quest was the gamble. The daughter of Panamint Annie (Mary Elizabeth White), who went through many hard years in Death Valley prospecting with her

mother, has said to me that gambling is the very essence of prospecting. One can readily see the truth of this. Prospecting was grueling hard work, and there were certainly easier ways to make a living. But they didn't offer that chance at fabulous riches.

This gambler's mindset may be one reason why prospectors in general have been famous for blowing the returns of a big mine sale in a fabulous spree. On the whole the women prospectors who did well reinvested in mining or, in a couple of cases, bought ranches, but there were a few gamblers in the lot. Panamint Annie was one, Marie Pantalon, a California gold rusher, was another, and Ferminia Sarras, a Nevada prospector known as the "Copper Queen," was also known for her grand sprees. This would have been considered par for the course in a male prospector, but in a woman at the turn of the century, it seemed astonishing. According to her great-grandson: "She kind of liked the other side of life too, the fancy side. So she'd go to L.A. or San Francisco, and she'd get the finest hotel there was, and go out and buy the finest clothes there was, shoes, hats, dresses—the whole act. And dine and wine and everything, just right up to the first class. She would hire a limousine and a chauffeur, and if she got a little bit lonesome, why she'd go out and get a gigolo, and they'd go out and have a big party, and have a good time. And pretty soon the money was dwindling pretty fast, so she'd say, 'I guess I'd better get back to the desert.' She'd come back and she'd get rid of all the clothes, and don her overalls, and take to the hills again and find another mine." Ferminia was so well known, for both her mining and her grand toots, that the town of Mina, Nevada was named after her.

However, defining prospecting as a search for riches, even as the grandest gamble of them all, doesn't explain the addiction of many of these women to the wilderness, which they often viewed romantically. Middle aged widows are a particularly strong presence among the women prospectors, and it's clear that many of these women found the wilderness a place of healing. We'd call that ecopsychology today; in those days, they didn't have a scientific word for it, but they knew what to do.

The woman prospector's deep love of the wilderness comes through with particular force in Frances Muncaster's diary entries during the honeymoon trip into the Chisana country that followed her third marriage in 1919. This trip had been Frances's idea, to which her much younger bridegroom, Bill Muncaster responded, "I have a strong body which is all for your service." In November she noted, "Broke camp at 10 A.M., just daylight. Bill going ahead with ice pick some of the time. Broke though the ice trying to get to the bank. Didn't get wet, froze too quick. Climbed around the cliff—pretty cold." Three days later she noted, "22 below zero this A.M. Nothing doing." On December 9, "Deep snow, no bottom. Bill and I snowshoed ahead of the dogs. The sled fell through the ice." That night they put up a lean-to, made a large fire, and roasted meat on sticks. Her December 21 entry read: "It must be 50 below zero. The mercury has gone down the bulb." On December 30 she wrote: "Broke camp at 10:45. Fierce going all day. Trail drifted over about a foot of bad snow. Camped at 4 P.M. Everybody dead tonight." (Everybody was Frances, her daughter Bonnie, and Bill.) At the end of January they settled in to spend the rest of the winter in a deserted cabin on Wellesley Lake, where they lived by hunting and ice fishing with a moosehide net. Not everyone would have considered a honeymoon of this kind an idyll of bliss, but when it was over Frances wrote, "Thus ends my year in the interior and happiness."

Another dimension of this love of the wilderness was a rejection of normal society, which the woman prospector tended to see as a dull and unpleasant alternative to a life of perpetual challenge and discovery. "Guess I'm different from most women," Fannie Quigley told a visitor. "I'd be lost in a house on a city lot. I've got to have all outdoors to roam in. That's living. Sure I work hard, but I love it. There's no monotony on the trail."

Moreover, the women prospectors saw the wilderness as a proving ground for independence. When Panamint Annie's daughter once burst into tears and said she hated the desert, Annie laughed and told her, "When you're in a city, everyone does things for you. You got people taking care of running water, electricity, picking up trash for you. When you're out on your own by yourself, there's no one to do it for you. You have to learn to do it yourself."

Some insights on the true nature of the quest can be gained by taking a close look at Klondike gold rusher and woman prospector Lillian Malcolm. Of all the 80 some women prospectors I could date from the 49ers to 1950, 47% belonged to the extraordi-

nary period between 1898 and 1910 that encompassed the Klondike rush and the central Nevada mining boom. Why this strong concentration? The period after 1870 had seen the rise of the so-called "New Woman," often unmarried and employed, and her expansion into new job categories. I've theorized that the synergy of this new spirit of independence and capability and the bonanza dreams of the Klondike-Goldfield period produced this surge of turn of the century women prospectors—of which Lillian Malcolm was one.

She was a former actress in the East, thirty years old. It's hard to imagine how a woman with no previous wilderness experience, so far as we know, made it through the well known hardships and dangers of that journey over the Chilkoot Pass to finally arrive at Dawson, but when you look at Lillian's resolute expression, you can well believe she'd make it.

Although her prospecting in the Klondike yielded only indifferent results and other gold rushers turned back in droves, Lillian persisted in her gold fever and turned down opportunities to resume acting, enter the saloon business, or settle for a sinecure as a government clerk. As a good looking former actress with skills as a musher that made her an asset on the trails and a way of telling a story that could enliven a long winter evening, she must have turned down many marriage proposals. At the turn of the century 79% of the women in Lillian's age bracket were married, and more conventional women often questioned the morals of the independent single woman. Dawson rapidly grew respectable and the newly arrived matrons formed a social vigilante committee to exclude women of "impure background," as they put it, from social functions. There are signs that Lillian was an object of this campaign of ostracism and it wounded her deeply. Later asked why she persisted in prospecting in the face of all obstacles, she replied: "It is due to the criticism I received from my own sex when I first began to prospect. I would notice, as I passed down the street of a mining camp, clad in my tallow-spattered Khaki, the wives of struggling clerks and other low-salaried men holding their garments aside as though I might contaminate them. My pride prevented my turning back."

After the rush to Nome commenced, Lillian set off with two men on a snowshoe journey to Nome. Although her critics probably suspected that this was a debauch in the wilds with two lovers, it sounds more like an exercise in survival. Before they reached Nome, they came close to starving and Lillian nearly drowned when she fell into the freezing waters while leaping from one ice cake to another on a river when the ice was breaking up. Lillian staked some claims, but several men wrested them away from her before she finished recording them. She later remarked that most men were chivalrous in all matters except the staking of claims. She began to suspect that the claim jumpers had bribed the judge to place her ground in receivership and deprive her of her rights—and knowing what went on in Nome, I'm not inclined to doubt it. Nearly a year of legal entanglements and attorney's fees accomplished what the most extreme hardships and dangers had not, and Lillian left the north country for the new boom in central Nevada. It was a common path for many prospectors of the day. In Tonopah, she was so dead broke that she told stories about her adventures in exchange for room and board.

In 1905 she set off from Rhyolite, now a ghost town, on a prospecting party into Death Valley with three men. To my frustration, the reporter who observed her departure wrote at great length about her clothes when I would have preferred to hear about her life. This was because the woman prospector usually wore pants—a shocker at the time, for which one woman prospector was arrested and jailed. Again and again, newspaper stories on the women prospectors devote an inordinate amount of space to their clothes. Lillian's Death Valley prospecting party broke up quickly after bad luck with their pack animals, and her remark to newsman that the next time she went into the desert she would "leave the nursing bottle behind" hinted that some of her companions weren't tough enough to meet her standards.

Almost immediately she headed back with an old Alaska comrade, prospector George Peget. If going off into the desert with a man not her husband kindled another scandal, Lillian defiantly held herself up as a role model for other women. "The grandest and healthiest life known is this rough pioneer life," she told a reporter. "And I don't see why more women are not out in the hills. It ought to be as easy and natural for women to read rocks as it is for astronomers to read the stars. The day will come when they will not sneer at Miss Malcolm. They will not pick up their skirts when I come around. Disgusting conventionality must pay the penalty in any pioneer

work."

As to prospecting being the healthiest life that is known, Lillian may well have been right. In an era when life expectancy was only in the forties, none of the women prospectors died young and many lived to ripe old ages. Nor did any die in the field. The one who came closest was Helen Quigley, a Utah prospector, who ventured alone into Death Valley with a horse and a pack mule in 1907. Six weeks later miners entered a cave in the Funeral Mountains to find Quigley, her hair whitened by alkali and sun, without food or water, feverish, and barely alive. Her narrow escape deterred her from prospecting not at all. As soon as her rescuers had nursed her back to health through weeks of delirium, she set off into the desert to find the ledge she thought she had discovered.

When I was writing my history of Goldfield, I did a computer study of mortality records there and found that prospectors were the longest-lived occupational group in the camp. I've theorized that this was because the long periods they spent in the wilderness isolated them from the infectious diseases that were the main killers for most of the period. Goldfield shows the role of infectious disease in a gold rush. Influenza and pneumonia peaked at the height of the boom, while perinatal and infant mortality loomed larger as Goldfield becomes a more stable community.

Living proof of her own assertions on woman's ability to endure as much as any man, Lillian traversed the sandy deserts of Death Valley, clambered up cliffs in the Panamints, staked claims, and eventually met up with that consummate con artist, Death Valley Scotty—she saw through him at once. She did find more promising claims in the Silver Peak range somewhat north of the Death Valley region and raised investment capital from Pittsburgh businessmen. That she succeeded at this in the midst of the tight money situation that preceded the October, 1907 financial panic is a strong tribute to Lillian's persuasive powers. The TONOAPH BONANZA called her a "hustler of no mean ability," and she herself did a little preening upon her return to Nevada about how she talked "common sense" to businessmen.

On the whole, I found that women prospectors were neither shy nor inept in promoting their mining claims—and that, of course, was the other half of prospecting. Despite woman's reputation for high moral character derived from the doctrine of the two spheres, those promotions could sometimes be unscrupulous, as was surely the case with Goldfield's Dr. Frances Williams. You must remember that in promoting these claims women prospectors labored under considerable disadvantages. They couldn't talk up their claims in the mining camp saloons where crowds habitually gathered because respectable women didn't enter saloons in those days. Unless invited on a ladies' night, they couldn't enter the fancy men's clubs, such as Goldfield's Montezuma Club, where mining men loved to prowl in search of investors. The hardest task, as Colorado mining entrepreneur Delia McCarthy remarked, was persuading men that a woman could understand mining. Despite these obstacles, the women prospectors succeeded through personal meetings with potential investors, which was Lillian Malcolm's method, mail promotions, and advertising in various forms. Frances Williams, for example, paraded a wagon decorated with banners and loaded with ore samples from a mine she was promoting through the Goldfield streets and persuaded a respected history professor and founder of the Nevada Historical Society to announce that one of her mines was the legendary Lost Breyfogle.

Although several valuable mines were developed in the Silver Peak area, Lillian's were not among them, and she shifted her operations to the Altar region in Mexico. As prospector Shorty Harris has remarked, "It's a funny thing, and something that I can't explain, but the country that is far away always looks best to a prospector. Somehow he feels that over that big range of mountains are better formations than those around him, and a hundred miles away is a rich outcropping that is just waiting to be staked out."

Nineteen-eleven found Lillian back in Nevada once more prospecting at Slumbering Hills and Jarbidge in the northern part of the state. A reporter who interviewed her observed, "Always in search of fortune, she had it at times almost within her grasp, only to have it fleet away." Yet, although her financial condition appeared little improved over the days when she told tales for her supper in Tonopah, she declared herself "in the mining game" to stay.

Her name appeared in newspapers a few times over the next several years, then she drops from sight.

It appears that she remained unmarried, which was far from atypical. Among the women prospectors, I found that women on their own, single, widowed, or divorced, more than doubled the married women. In this they showed closer resemblance to male gold rushers than to other frontier women. Even women prospecting with husbands were not necessarily there on the husband's initiative. Josie and Wyatt Earp are a good example. Many people mesmerized by the gunfight at the OK corral don't realize that Josie and Wyatt spent their last years prospecting at Palmetto and other locales in the Nevada and California deserts. They did this because Josie got bitten by the prospecting bug while they were at Nome. After they reached Nevada, Wyatt wanted to ranch and Josie wanted to prospect. They drew straws, and Josie won. I hope that these and other instances will lay to rest, six feet deep at least, the presumption that women prospectors merely helped their husbands.

Another respect in which Lillian Malcolm was far from atypical was that, so far as we know, she had no children. The incompatibility of motherhood and prospecting was a dilemma that none of the women prospectors succeeded in solving, although they tried every possibility. If she brought the children with her into the wilderness, she maintained a normal family life but sacrificed the children's schooling and isolated them from community friendships and associations—as someone has recently said, "It takes a village." To postpone her prospecting for perhaps twenty years until the children were grown would be a congenital impossibility for most prospectors. The remaining solution, leaving the children behind in an orphanage or boarding school, or with a relative meant abandoning the domestic role of a mother. The large preponderance of single men in the gold rushes suggests that men also struggled with the incompatibility of prospecting and family life. California gold rusher William Downie recalled that he always avoided taking married men on prospecting expeditions. "They would whine about their wives," he wrote, "wonder how their children were getting along, speculate upon the possibilities of a speedy return; and at night, when we bachelors rolled ourselves in our blankets and slept the sleep of the just, they would grunt and groan, and pray and weep, and gaze at the stars, and make themselves unfit for the work at hand."

The result of the incompatibility between this kind of work and family life was that motherhood appears fairly uncommon among the women prospectors. The dearth of children undoubtedly contributed to the disappearance of the women prospectors from western history, since devoted sons and daughters who would preserve their memory were often lacking. When I was able to develop the story of a woman prospector from birth to death, it was often with the help of descendants. With no such sources to turn to for Lillian Malcolm, I could only uncover an eighteen year piece of her life.

At this point you may be wondering whether any of the women prospectors made discoveries worthy of note. They did. The most successful was Louise Grantham, who in company with Siberian Red Huhn, developed a mine in Death Valley that in its day produced more commercial talc than any other mine in the West. Another success story was Belle Butler, who made a great silver strike at the Mizpah ledge in Tonopah. On the whole I found that almost two-thirds of the women prospectors on whom there was some financial information were very successful or moderately so—quite a surprise, considering that our usual image of the prospector is a ragged creature cadging grubstakes and leading a hand-to-mouth existence. Other women prospectors made small discoveries or mined on a subsistence level, which was by no means an unimportant alternative to starvation during the Great Depression. Only a handful were complete failures, an assertion they would probably have disputed.

In spending their money, the women prospectors conformed to the general pattern of their male counterparts, living rather modestly and investing. Not always investing successfully, I might add. Northern Nevada prospector Mary Grantz made a good deal of money in her manganese mine, the Black Diablo, and sank it into her gold mine, the Charleston Hill. As they say in Winnemucca, "The Black Diablo is where she made it, and the Charleston Hill is where she lost it."

Charitable impulses were very strong among the women prospectors. If she struck bonanza, Lillian Malcolm wanted to create an organization to assist temporarily destitute women on their own. Belle Butler, who did strike bonanza, was so bountiful in her philanthropies that she became known as the "mother of Nevada." They showed a notable lack of social ambition, in contrast to such figures as the

"unsinkable" Molly Brown. No woman prospector built a mansion. She would be more likely to live in the old style of the frontier in a cabin, or often in a tent.

How did the woman prospector acquire her immunity to the social ambitions so evident among newly rich mining wives? Remember that the woman prospector rejected conventional values when she chose her occupation, while acceptance in society entailed displaying one's wealth in almost ritualistic ways to other rich people and winning their favor. For much of the period, social acceptability also involved conformity to the code of behavior dictated by the doctrine of separate spheres. Most fundamentally, the woman prospector who had succeeded on her own hook had a surer sense of self than the social climbing wife. Indeed, many, such as Lillian Malcolm, appear supremely self-confident. The subtext of much social climbing is insecurity, a need to be validated through the eyes of others. Perhaps the women prospectors had no compulsion to seek this kind of approval because they had a solid sense of their own worth based on accomplishment.

To succeed is to find what one seeks, and dollar returns were only one strand in the odyssey of the woman prospector. She was engaged in what prospector Carl Wikstrom has called painting her name on the mountain, a fundamentally modern form of self expression. To her the wilderness was a dream, a mirage of treasure, an addiction, a challenge, an adventure, and a quasi-religious experience. Prospecting provided a reason for venturing into the wilderness and a means for remaining there. It was a place of healing for the stricken where one could feel the nearness of God, a place where the young woman could find adventure and the older woman could find the peace to undertake what Germaine Greer has called "the journey inwards towards wisdom and serenity."

This address has been adapted from Sally Zanjani's book *A Mine of Her Own: Women Prospectors in the American West, 1850-1950* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997).