

*Compare and contrast the benefits versus the hardships women faced in
Telluride, Colorado and other Western towns in the early 1900s.*



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Part I: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will discuss the period in Telluride, Colorado during the Victorian era in regards to women and their work roles in society. The investigation compares and contrasts the benefits versus the hardships women faced in Telluride, and other western towns in the early 1900s by evaluating gender roles in this time, reasons women traveled to the West, the perception of the West, and true circumstances women faced, specifically in Telluride.

A significant source for this study is a document archive of the “Telluride Town” section of the Twelfth Census of the United States found online. The source documents personal information such as names, gender, occupation, location, relation, personal description, nativity, citizenship, and education of citizens of San Juan County from 1900 to 1910. These documents were used in this investigation for the purpose of having a primary source for documented individuals and their Telluride occupations.

A second significant source was an interview with Telluride resident Kierstin Bridger, a historian, author, and professor at Adams State University in Alamosa, Colorado. She works with the Telluride Historical Museum voicing the audio tour, lectures about women in Telluride, and has written a book of poems called *Demimonde* based on her historical research on the women of Telluride’s Red Light District.

The value of the purpose of the document from the Twelfth Census of the United States is that it is an unmediated document designed to be unbiased. There is no room for opinions in the writing. The documents consist of detailed, thorough, firsthand information. The value of the census is that it provides an unbiased base of information amidst varied historical opinions.

A census is straight-forward in theory, however, it has several limitations. The first being veracity. People often lied about their true occupation. The second limitation is the way in which this information was documented. The pages were handwritten in ink, and many of the lines are difficult if not impossible to read. This creates the potential for misreading someone's job title or other written text.

The value of the content of the interview with Kierstin Bridger is her expertise through research of individual lives of women in Telluride during the mining days. The second value was her accessibility. I was able to have face-to-face interviews with her to fill in holes in my research where I was unable to find sources.

A limitation of Kierstin Bridger as a source is that she lives in modern day. Though she has substantial knowledge on the subject, none of it is from firsthand experience. Another limitation is that Kierstin Bridger is primarily focused as a literature professor and author rather than a professional historian.

Part II: Investigation

The Wild West traditionally brings to mind an image of cowboys and cowgirls freely riding their horses through the dusty desert; it was a place where women and men fled to seek a liberated life, but the reality of the West, particularly in Telluride, was far more complicated. Telluride, Colorado is a small town in the southwestern part of the state. In 1972 a ski lift was erected, which led to the town's current status as a tourist destination. However, before then, Telluride was a much different place, functioning as a mining town starting in 1845 when silver, lead, zinc, copper, gold, and minerals were discovered¹. This was the Victorian Age, when, especially in the East, men were the primary breadwinners and women stayed home to do housework and look after the children². In Telluride, however, most men in the working class served as miners, spending long hours risking their lives, often widowing their wives. If the household didn't make enough money or the wives were widowed, the women had to find money elsewhere. These women, untethered from men and working outside the home, were commonly dismissed in public for not being worthy of respect³. However, history often glorifies the unconventional lifestyle for women in the Wild West. Compared to the Victorian-era values in the rest of the US, the culture in the West was perceived as liberating⁴. This investigation examines the roles women played in Telluride's society comparing and contrasting the benefits versus the hardships they faced in the West in the early 1900s. The investigation shows the opportunities that were given to women in the West, and the great cost at which they came.

¹ "Telluride, Colorado." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 17 May 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telluride,_Colorado.

² "Victorian Values in a New Age." *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, www.ushistory.org/Us/39d.asp.

³ Bridger, Kierstin B. "Women in Telluride in the Early 1900s." 15 Nov. 2019.

⁴ "Victorian Values in a New Age." *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, www.ushistory.org/Us/39d.asp.

During this time in history, Eastern women commonly saw the West as an opportunity for a new start; a place where any woman could pursue her dream. As stated in an article from *TIME*, “women found plenty of opportunities in the West that weren’t available in the East: everything from the right to vote [in Wyoming⁵] to equal pay for women teachers to more liberal divorce laws.”⁶ Many western women found freedom in working on family farms, caring for, riding, and employing their own horses. A small minority drove stagecoaches and were paid for it⁷. Homesteading also became a common practice⁸. Furthermore, women could be entrepreneurs, authors, and teachers⁹. Besides these otherwise male-dominated occupations, women fled to the West to pursue careers in theatre, dance, and singing¹⁰. While it was possible to work these sought after jobs, it was incredibly difficult to find enough success to stay afloat financially.

When women arrived in the West, they found it difficult to sustain a living on their dreams alone. Men were paid substantially more and could secure better paying jobs, though this pay gap was less substantial in the West¹¹. Some women dressed as men to work for higher pay¹². Others found jobs as school teachers (which required them to be unmarried) or nurses, but these jobs required an education. It was difficult to find work that paid a living wage without

⁵ “Wyoming and the 19th Amendment (U.S. National Park Service).” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/articles/wyoming-women-s-history.htm.

⁶ Square, Zócalo Public. “Women and the Myth of the American West.” *Time*, Time, 11 Jan. 2015, time.com/3662361/women-american-west/.

⁷ Weiser, Kathy, and B. N. Goldsmith. “Stagecoach Kings in the Old West.” *Legends of America*, Jan. 2020, www.legendsofamerica.com/we-stagecoachkings/.

⁸ Denver Post. “Pioneer Women.” *The Denver Post*, The Denver Post, 8 May 2016, www.denverpost.com/2007/04/05/pioneer-women/.

⁹ “Women and the Myth of the American West”

¹⁰ Kierstin Bridger

¹¹ “Women and the Myth of the American West.”

¹² “Women and the Myth of the American West.”

having an education, which caused many women to work outside of the law¹³. Numerous women who came to the West, including Telluride, started out entertaining in saloons, but soon ran out of money and were forced to find additional work, like prostitution¹⁴. Though prostitution was legal in many western states, depending on the county, city, or neighborhood, it could be highly regulated and arbitrarily supervised. It was always controversial and stigmatised. Women were often forced into prostitution because of debt and/or aggressive managers¹⁵. It is difficult to say exactly how many women worked in prostitution because on formal documents, code words like “seamstress”, “laundress”, or “boarding housekeeper” were used as euphemisms for madam or prostitute¹⁶.

According to Telluride writer and historian Kierstin Bridger, these women, specifically prostitutes, often weren’t viewed with respect. The Victorian era viewed women as pious and pure which was the opposite of how these Telluridian women were treated. “You became a caricature instead of a human being,” Bridger says. She mentioned several newspaper articles from the early 1900s which reported cases of male aggressors attacking or harming women of the Red Light District. The papers, often in crime reports, use men’s full names without comment on their vocation or trade, while women were often called “denizens of the Red Light District.”¹⁷ These women usually died young, either from succumbing to disease, committing suicide, or being killed by a client or “handler”¹⁸. These women weren’t protected by the law. Arbitrary fines, jail time, and abuse were common. They were also not accepted in society; they

¹³ Kierstin Bridger

¹⁴ Kierstin Bridger

¹⁵ Don Paulson, *Mines, Miners, and Much More*

¹⁶ Kierstin Bridger

¹⁷ Kierstin Bridger

¹⁸ “Popcorn Alley.” *Telluride*, www.telluride.net/popcorn-alley/.

had assigned shopping days, were limited to walking on certain sides of the street, and had to live in allocated “sporting districts.”¹⁹ Free to live as they “chose”, they existed in the shadows of the upper class²⁰.

Two women, Calamity Jane and a woman from Telluride called Ramona appear as opposites upon first glance, but upon close examination they had more in common than one would expect. Calamity Jane is and was celebrated as a classic western female figure who exercised freedom and unorthodox behavior in the Wild West²¹. Ramona, however, is known as one of many women who came to Telluride to perform in a parlor, known today as the “Old Silver Bell Building,” and who committed suicide at age 21 after falling into prostitution²². On the surface, Calamity Jane was the example of hope in the West, and Ramona was the example of what could go wrong. The reality of Calamity Jane’s life was far from glamorous. At a young age she moved to the West and earned a reputation as a heroic cowgirl with a good aim²³. However, since she was a teenager she had been involved in prostitution and heavy drinking. In her later years she suffered from poverty, homelessness, severe alcoholism, and depression, dying at the age forty-seven²⁴. These women demonstrate that the glowing image of the West for independent women during the Victorian era was far more complicated than it first appeared.

The law favored men substantially over women. Though prostitution was legal in Colorado, prostitutes could be fined and punished for lude behavior, intoxication, and

¹⁹ Kierstin Bridger

²⁰ Kierstin Bridger

²¹ Fraga, Kaleena. “Calamity Jane: Hard-Scrabble Wild West Heroine Or Compulsive Liar?” *All That's Interesting*, All That's Interesting, 7 Oct. 2019, allthatsinteresting.com/calamity-jane.

²² “Popcorn Alley.”

²³ “Calamity Jane”

²⁴ “Calamity Jane”

misconduct at any time²⁵. Additionally, no woman, no matter her occupation or location in the US, was allowed to have credit or own property. This made it incredibly difficult for western women who were trying to make a life for themselves. It was also legal for women's husbands or fathers to physically abuse them in their household. Though some women found success, it was often made possible by the protection of a husband, brother, or father. Women in Telluride and other Western towns who broke social conventions were often marginalized. If they strayed from societal norms (particularly traditional marriage), women on their own often faced addiction, loss of connection to family and support, estrangement, banishment, or severe depression often leading to suicide²⁶.

It's notable that while some sources show women thriving in the West, other sources, Telluride historians in particular, bring attention to their suffering. According to Bridger, "a woman on her own had to be versatile, evasive and clever to thrive in a man's world. The west had more opportunities but it came at a great cost."²⁷ Bridger mentioned that many of the sources which claim that life in the Wild West was adventurous and full of opportunity for women are simply painting a broad stroke of the time period.

While there were opportunities for women in the West, it's clear that the benefits didn't come without hardship. To address the initial question, "Compare and contrast the benefits versus the hardships women faced in Telluride, Colorado and other western towns in the early 1900s," it's clear that there are several different perspectives regarding life for a woman in the Wild West. Some believe the days of the West were full of opportunity, adventure, and power for women. Others address each individual's suffering, as they weren't accepted or supported by

²⁵ Kierstin Bridger

²⁶ Kierstin Bridger

²⁷ Kierstin Bridger

the greater society, which was especially exaggerated in the West, as these women were physically or lawfully harmed as punishment for seeking independence. The perception of the West was a glorified generalization of an otherwise challenging and dangerous lifestyle for most unconventional western women.

Part III: Reflection

My goal for this investigation was to explore the most accurate version of life for women in the American West, specifically in Telluride, in comparison with the idealized fantasy of the West. I was interested in Telluride because it's my hometown and I walk through the ghost of its past daily. In this investigation, I was challenged to analyse information as opposed to stating it. I found it interesting to analyse and evaluate different sources because they often provided contrasting information and opinions.

Through this process I faced several challenges. I struggled to find unbiased information, discovering multiple sides and opinions about the topic, rather than factual statements. I also had difficulty finding enough sources. Because Telluride is a relatively unknown town, my primary sources were the local museum, the library, and local historians. With the closure of these resources due to the Coronavirus Pandemic, I was forced to rely more heavily on online sources. Furthermore, many of the women I researched were illiterate, so there are no firsthand accounts such as diaries, letters, or memoirs. History was written about them, not by them. Lastly, many sources which have information about Telluride have limited information about the women who lived there. I now understand how researching marginalized populations can be difficult for historians as often these people didn't have a substantial voice in their time.

Kierstin Bridger spoke to me about her methods of research. When she reads archival material or reviews photographs, she contemplates the material's underlayer, considering the point of view of the subject. Analysing history in this way allowed me to avoid generalization and stereotyping of the marginalized population which this paper investigates.

Upon reflecting on this investigation, I acknowledge that there are certain demographics which I left out, namely higher class Caucasian women. I also didn't specify the racial makeup of the women which I focused on, knowing that working class women in the US consisted of women from varied ethnicities. Due to the length of this paper, I generally focused on working class women.

I now understand multiple challenges historians face when attempting to see the truth behind generalizations. I learned that even widely accepted truths may only be accurate on a broader level and it is important to look closer into the lives of those being studied.

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