



Bryan Patrick/bpatrick@sacbee.com

"My house looks like 1850 blew up in it," says writer Chris Enss of Grass Valley, who researches old documents for her Western historical nonfiction.

Go west, young woman

Grass Valley author
brings to life
the women of
the Old West

BY ALLEN PIERLEONI
apierleoni@sacbee.com

"The couples who lived in the Old West had drive and grit," Chris Enss was saying, passion rising in her voice. "They had the ability to persevere despite rough winters, disease, hostile natives and not enough food. They stuck together.

"Now we live in a world of crybabies and whiners and 'this isn't working out, how will I ever go on?' kind of thing."

Enss' opinion may be provocative, but it's certainly informed. She has researched and written 19 books since 2000 (four to be published this year), most of which document hundreds of the forgotten women of the 19th century Old West — the entertainers, mail-order brides, soldiers, nurses, doctors, scouts, gamblers and prostitutes — and their adventures, romances and hardships. In addition, she's written the introductions to three reprints of "dime

novels," which were the romance novels of the day.

We were sitting in a booth over breakfast at Charlie's Angels, a Western-themed restaurant in Grass Valley. She had ordered biscuits and gravy, which seemed in keeping.

Though Enss says she is a proponent of women's rights, she also believes that, in general, many women today are too quick to complain, "given the things that women had to endure in the Old West."

"For example, there was Nancy Kelsey," she said. "She was the only woman in a group of 160-plus people making the (cross-country) journey on this particular wagon train. She made the whole trip carrying a 1-year-old baby on her hip. The baby wasn't sick one day in the four to five months it took (the group) to get here.

"In one journal kept by (another) in the party, someone wrote, 'Whenever we felt slow in our spirits, that we couldn't go on, we would look back and see Nancy Kelsey and be encouraged.'"

Enss has become an expert researcher who knows her way around

► OLD WEST, Page E2

For a bibliography of Chris Enss' 15 published works, see page E2

Old West: Writer digs up true tales of love, danger

► FROM PAGE E1
19th century newspapers, letters and journals, and she can navigate the politics of history museums and historical societies. One of her favorite places is the California Room of the main Sacramento Library.

"I don't classify myself as an Old West historian," she said. "They are archaeologists who devote their lives (to history). I'm more of an observer of history who retells what is there."

As she's shown, there is plenty of material to mine. She shared this story:

"One of the sweetest romantic stories (told in 'Love Untamed') was the romance between Frank Butler and Annie Oakley."

The couple performed their sharpshooting acts together. Butler soon realized it was his wife the crowds were coming to see, and not him. Ultimately, he stepped aside and "put Annie front and center. It was that generous sacrifice that he made. ... It was a thing that moved me."

They had been married for 52 years when Oakley died in 1926. "Frank Butler was so overcome with grief that he stopped eating and died 17 days later," Enss said. "You know about what Annie Oakley did, but you don't know about that wonderful, terribly romantic 'Can't-live-without-you' sickness. We think as a modern society that we invented that, but we don't have any idea."

Love at first sight?

Another fascinating tale – this one less romantic – appears in "Hearts West":

"Eleanor Berry wrote to the Matrimonial News to find a husband and struck up a correspondence with a gentleman who asked her to marry him. So she traveled (from the East) to the Nevada County area."

"No sooner did she get here when her stagecoach was held up by masked bandits, who demanded that everybody throw down everything they owned. She was frantic. She was on her way to get married and had her trousseau with her. She pleaded with the robbers, 'Please let me keep these things.' The leader said OK."

"Eleanor proceeded to the home where the ceremony would take place. There, she met her future sister-in-law, who took her into the back bedroom and helped her prepare for the wedding."

"When the organist started to play, Eleanor came out and met the man she'd been corresponding with for so long. The moment he began to speak, though, there was something familiar

about him. Then she realized he was the man who had just held her up.

"That part of the story is cute," Enss said, "but the second half isn't. Eleanor was humiliated and horrified. She left, returned to her home and ended up killing herself."

Her life as a stand-up

We left the cafe and headed to Enss' house in the wooded hills that surround Grass Valley. What western route did she herself take to arrive at this point?

Enss, 46, was an "Army brat" who ended up in Fort Huachuca in Arizona, not far from Tombstone. "I loved the history of the Southwest and loved hanging out in Tombstone," she said.

After two years at Cochise Community College – during which she "foolishly got married, but I later fired him" – she transferred to the University of Arizona in Tucson. There, she won a playwriting contest that "prompted me to do more writing, specifically comedy."

Enss got divorced and left for Los Angeles after winning a scholarship to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, where she broke into comedy writing for television shows ("Designing Women," "The Carol Burnett Show").

"It was the 1980s, I was in my 20s and everybody was in Los Angeles doing the same thing," she recalled. She returned to Arizona and got a job at a television station, doing behind-the-scenes work. At the same time, she returned to college and developed a stand-up comedy act (at 24, she was a finalist on Showtime's "The Search for the Funniest Person in America").

"One of the clubs I played was a strip club because, you know, that's where they need comedians," Enss said, her voice segueing into stand-up mode. "Not a night went by when those boys didn't yell out, 'Hey, get them naked women off the stage and bring out the comedian!'"

"I looked like a giant-haired Mary Tyler Moore. My persona was, 'I'm single, with giant hair.' (The routine) was the Tucson-Tombstone dating scene that really wasn't happening. I would talk about some of the gentlemen I had dated, who thought monogamy was a type of wood."

Learned to take a punch

After college, Enss vicariously lived an Old West role when she worked as a stuntwoman at Old Tucson Studios, a "town" built in 1939 as a movie set for Westerns. It's been a theme park since 1961 and still is an active set.

"Nobody would believe me as



Among the Old West memorabilia that fills Chris Enss' house is a vial containing splinters from a log cabin erected at Donner Summit by members of the Donner Party.

"You know about what Annie Oakley did, but you don't know about that wonderful, terribly romantic 'can't-live-without-you' sickness. We think as a modern society that we invented that, but we don't have any idea."

Chris Enss

author of books on the women of the Old West

a saloon girl, so I said, 'Can I dress like a guy, please, and do something exciting?' I learned how to take a punch and give a punch, how to fall out of building windows. I'd come out firing my gun."

Enss met and wed her current husband, an engineer for National Semiconductor. After two years, his job took him to the company's Grass Valley Design Center as a manager.

"I got to town and cried for three weeks because there was this white stuff coming out of the sky that would just stick around," she said.

At home in the Old West

We drove up the steep driveway to Enss' house, set on a hillside amid a grove of oaks.

"My house looks like 1850 blew up in it," she cautioned. Inside, the walls were decorated with framed Western movie posters and nearly a museum's worth of Western-themed memorabilia and knickknacks.

Among them was a glass vial containing splinters from a log foundation of the Murphy cabin, erected at the Donner Summit camp by members of the Donner Party (there were two camps). Its authenticity was verified by a justice of the peace, said the label on the vial. It sold for \$1 in 1893.

We sat in Enss' cluttered office, surrounded by books on the Old West. I named some of her own titles, beginning with the latest:

"The Lady Was a Gambler: True Stories of Notorious

chasing and capturing murderer James Kennedy, who had shot and killed a woman.

"Kennedy got off. He was from a wealthy Texas family, so nothing's changed ..."

Coming to a theater ...

One of Enss' books – "Playing for Time: The Death Row All-Stars" – is being made into a movie. It's a bizarre story and something of a departure for her.

Set in 1911, it's the true story of a group of men waiting execution on death row at Wyoming State Penitentiary, and how they formed a winning baseball team.

"It began as a program to bring exercise into the prison," she said. "But the warden and other prison officials saw how good the players were and thought, 'We could make a lot of money betting on this team.' The team played against the Western states' baseball clubs, and clubs representing large companies. After five years, controversy and public outcry against the program grew; that's when the executions began."

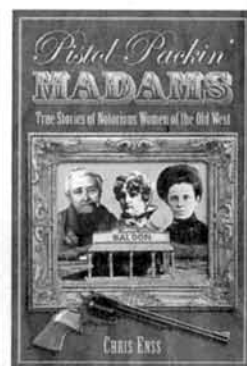
'A lousy pioneer'

Last question: If Enss could go back in time and be a woman of the Old West, would she?

"I would like to have been one of those people who pushed beyond Independence, Mo., and went to the edge of a new world," she said. "Can you imagine what it would have been like to have seen the Rocky Mountains for the first time? To have that vision where it appears as though the sky is being held up by mountain ranges?"

Then a flash of the comedian came through: "But I would have been a lousy pioneer. I admit it. I would have gotten an hour out of Independence and said, 'Where's the bathroom?'"

Call The Bee's Allen Pierleoni, (916) 321-1128.



Amazon.com

A treasury of Western lore

Grass Valley writer Chris Enss specializes in historical nonfiction that documents the forgotten women of the Old West. In addition, she has written biographies of Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and John Wayne, as well as the introductions to three reprints of 19th century "dime novels." She will publish four more titles this year. For more information, visit her Web site, www.chrisenss.com. Here are her books that have been published:

- "Buffalo Gals: Women of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show"
- "Gilded Girls: Women Entertainers of the Old West"
- "Hearts West: True Stories of Mail-Order Brides on the Frontier"

- "How the West Was Worn: BUSTLES and BUCKSKINS on the Wild Frontier"
- "Love Untamed: Romances of the Old West"

- "Pistol Packin' Madams: True Stories of Notorious Women of the Old West"
- "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon: Women Soldiers and Patriots of the Western Frontier"

- "The Doctor Wore Petticoats: Women Physicians of the Old West"
- "With Great Hope: Women of the California Gold Rush"

- "Tales Behind the Tombstones: The Deaths and Burials of the Old West's Most Nefarious Outlaws, Notorious Women and Celebrated Lawmen"

- "The Lady Was a Gambler: True Stories of Notorious Women of the Old West"
- "Playing for Time: The Death Row All Stars"

- "The Cowboy and the Señorita: A Biography of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans"

- "Happy Trails: A Pictorial Celebration of the Life and Times of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans"

- "The Young Duke: The Early Life of John Wayne"

— Allen Pierleoni