

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Chris Esss details her quest to share the history of women of the Old West



By PETER SUCIU

The story of the role women played on the frontier is one that has long been overlooked, especially in popular culture. In movies and TV shows, women have been largely relegated to supporting characters, and while that has changed in recent years, the role women actually played in taming the Old West is still largely misunderstood.

New York Times best-selling author and screenwriter Chris Esss has sought to address the misconceptions and misinformation about this period, and has become the most prominent author on the subject of women in the Old West. She has written more than 20 books on the subject, including such colorful titles as *Hearts West: True Stories of Mail-Order Brides on the Frontier* (2005), *How the West Was Worn: Bustles and Buckskins on the Wild Frontier* (2005), *Pistol Packin' Madams: True Stories of Notorious Women of the Old West* (2006) and *The Doctor Wore Petticoats: Women Physicians of the Old West* (2006). I recently spoke with Esss to learn more,



How did your interest in the Old West begin?

I worked at a radio station doing the news, and I brought in "historical minutes" to the producers. I came across the

story of the Bartleson-Bidwell Party, which was led by Captain John Bartleson and John Bidwell. It was the first attempt at a wagon crossing from Missouri to California,

and what was interesting is that it was made up of more than 80 men and just one woman.

The accounts of her were that she was barefoot and carrying a baby on her hip, but she was referred to only as Mrs. Benjamin Kelsey. I felt she deserved more notoriety than that—and that she had to have a first name. I researched her story and found that she was Nancy Kelsey, and was the first white woman to travel overland from Missouri and cross the Sierra Nevada into California.

While Nancy Kelsey's story has been told, there were many women whose stories we don't know.

I wanted to write about these women and find out what they did, but not from the standpoint of "I am woman, hear me roar." That wasn't what these women did. These weren't early feminists—just women doing something special at the time.

Why haven't we heard more of these stories?

The simple answer is that a lot of the history was written by men, and these men wrote the history of

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not just what they saw, but what they could write to their families about. Many of the women were "soiled doves," or women of ill repute. Who would write their families about such women?

We see the letters and stories that talk about the gold they found, or the journeys, but we don't see "I got some gold today and spent the night with a whore." Who is going to write about that? Men wrote about what they could share, and that didn't include the stories of prostitutes. You have to dig into the past to find the stories, and a lot wasn't there.

What are some of the biggest myths regarding women on the frontier?

The biggest is that women were completely helpless, and if it wasn't for men, the women couldn't have survived. Women showed that they could get focused, that they could set themselves up in business and be successful.

What we have to remember is that women came west with their fathers, brothers and husbands, but many of those men died en route, and the women couldn't just turn back. They took on jobs, notably as laundresses, which might not seem like a big deal. But the military hired them to do the laundry, and suddenly these women had a dozen or more clients. They would

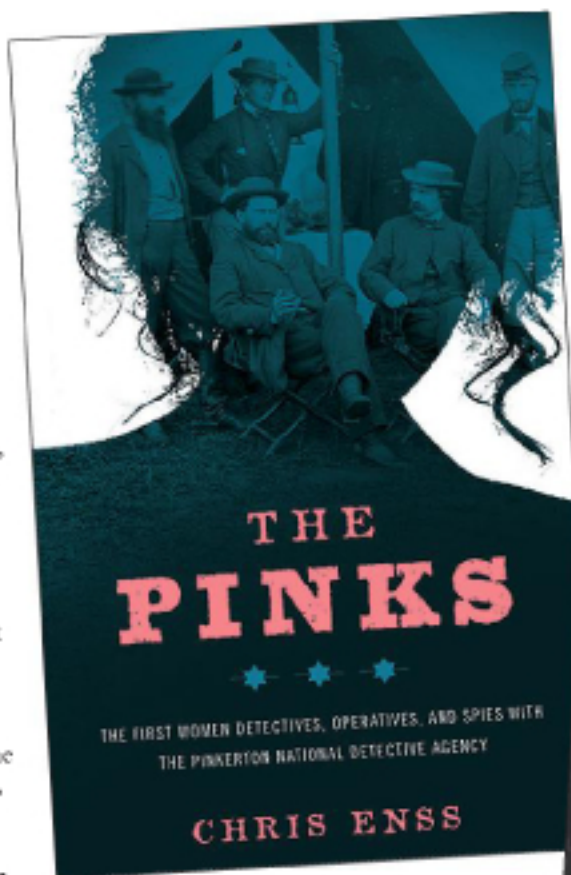
use that money to start schools, their own mercantile enterprises. They found ways to break into business and make a life for themselves despite the hardships.

How hard is it to research this particular topic?

I am also a private investigator by trade, so I love the deep dive and research. I go into Old West homes and look at places where people wouldn't

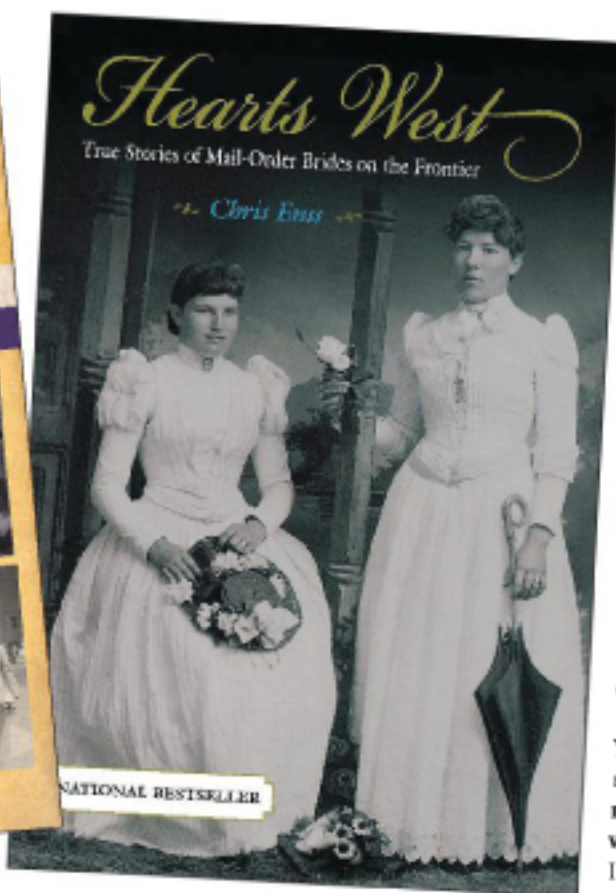
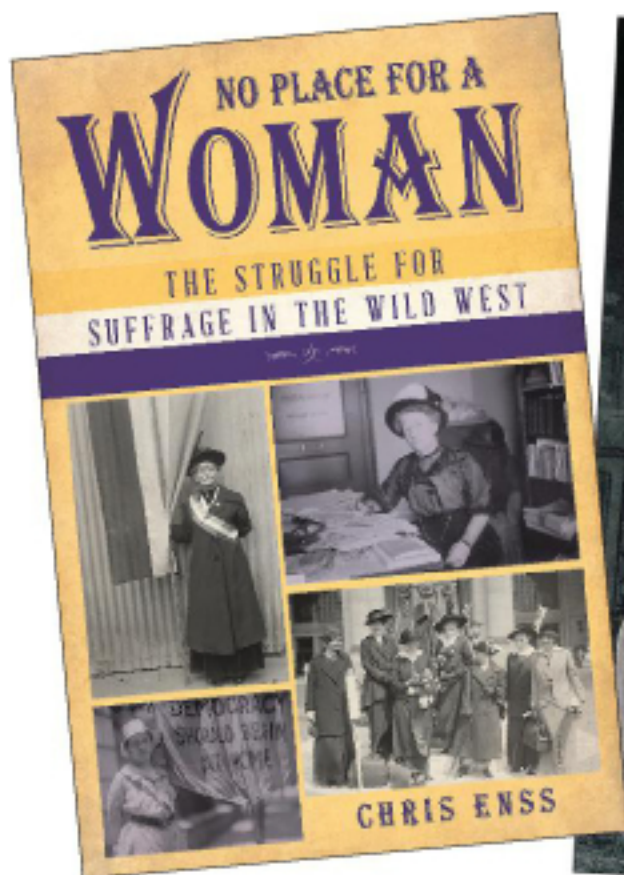
normally look. In the Gold Country in California, it was common to insulate the walls with whatever you had on hand, so this included letters and papers. This has allowed those to be preserved, and they offer information that was private that can now be shared. I've poked around attics and cellars. It is a very different way to research. I've also found journals, and it can be tedious.

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What are some of the stories you've come across?

One example is that the women's suffrage movement was happening in the Old West long before it happened back in the East. Women in the West had voted as early as 1870, while women in the East couldn't vote until 1920. Aaron A. Sargent, a senator from California, and his wife, Ellen, were on a train when they met Susan B. Anthony. The train got stuck in snow in Wyoming, and the Sargents shared their provisions with Anthony and discussed what eventually became the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote.



How do you feel about the way women have been depicted in movies and TV shows over the years?

A lot has changed as we have progressed with what can be shown on TV. Back in the 1950s, you couldn't show Miss Kitty on *Gunslinger* at the top of the stairs—dressed in fancy clothing as she surveyed the saloon—and say she was a whore. It was her place, but they never said what went on there.

Motion pictures and TV shows have taken liberties, as it's entertainment and show business, not art or history. A good example is *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. No one was as attractive as Jane Seymour. But the show

got it right that she wasn't welcome, and it took a while for people to trust her. Another wonderful series was *Godless*, which highlighted the gritty underbelly of the West. It was very spot on. This is why *Godless* ran for seven episodes, while *Dr. Quinn* managed to run for seven seasons—viewers wanted to see the pretty people and the clean version of the Old West.

Is it a good thing that prostitutes and mail-order brides are getting more attention these days?

It is, because the soiled doves gave women the right to vote. Those women were able to build a business and

own property, and they often paid for licenses that raised the money to fund the sheriff's or fire department, and as such, it was those women who could vote.

But we have to remember this was true of those prostitutes who could live long enough to have that life. It was a rough business, and you were lucky if you lived until 30. There were exceptions, like Big Nose Kate, who lived until 90. But what was it like to kiss Doc Holliday when he had tuberculosis?

We can't understate the importance of the schools, and without the women, there might not have any. Women were crucial in

making that happen. They were amazing teachers, and they didn't complain about lack of resources or funds. They'd take a class to the local graveyard and teach numbers off tombstones. Women also went "packing" to school, which could be dangerous. They didn't complain about having to carry a gun.

You've written so many stories already, so what's next?

I have a book on the First

Transcontinental Railroad and the role women played in it. They didn't work the line, but they were there in other ways. There was Laura Bullion, who participated in the Great Northern train robbery. That was the last train to be robbed in the Old West. There was also Dr. Mary Engle Pennington, who invented the refrigerated boxcar, which was crucial during World War I, as it helped in transporting food from one coast to the other. And while there are no pictures of women at the Golden Spike ceremony, which marked the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad, women were certainly there behind the scenes. ☺