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Amidst the Gold Dust: Women Who Forged the West

Julie Danneberg
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In spite of what one might believe from reading the available literature, not all of the daring and colorful characters who explored our western frontier were men. Anyone curious about some of the more interesting women who settled—and tamed—the west should find this book a treasure. Danneberg tells the stories of five early female pioneers using excerpts from their journals and letters, newspaper clippings, and the reactions, both real and imagined, of the people around them.

Isabella Bird was a proper English gentlewoman who explored Colorado spending nights in a cabin whose logs were so poorly chinked that the snow blew in and covered her bed. She also climbed Longs Peak and helped round up cattle—hardly the life of a typical Victorian lady.

Clara Brown was a freed slave who walked most of the way to Denver cooking for a wagon train. Cook, laundress, and tireless volunteer in her community, she was finally named a Colorado Pioneer, the first woman and the first person of color to be honored in this way.

Margaret Brown, the only one of the women profiled likely to be familiar to most readers, quit school in Missouri to work in a tobacco company at the age of thirteen. She went to Colorado in search of excitement, and organized everything from soup kitchens to charity balls before her famous trip on the Titanic immortalized in the musical comedy, The Unsinkable Molly Brown.

Nellie Cashman was an Irish immigrant who is described as being “too restless to stay in one place for long.” She moved first from Boston to San Francisco and then from one mining town to another working as cook and landlady and even trying her hand at prospecting for gold.

Sara Winnemucca was a Paiute Indian from Nevada who spent much of her life working for better understanding between the Indian tribes and the settlers and soldiers moving west.

As different as these women appear, they shared a sense of adventure, enormous stamina, and courage. Their stories, told with copies of old photographs and sidebars of historical background facts, make for inspiring reading.

JEAN KUBALA (April 15, 2001)

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