

## Clothes Make the Man

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Gender roles on the trail and in frontier towns appeared to be black and white – men did the hunting, herding, mining and gambling, while women did the cooking, cleaning, mending and child-rearing. But as with so many things in life, there were exceptions to these gender roles, though many were subtle enough to have escaped documentation at the time.

In the 1800's, women living as men could enjoy freedoms unknown to their gender – by virtue of a manly masquerade, a woman could earn more money for equal labor, avoid a potentially abusive marriage, and even register to vote in national elections.

It is not difficult to find stories of rebellious women such as Calamity Jane or Poker Alice, notorious ladies who asserted their right to drink and gamble alongside men in the frontier saloons. It is more difficult to describe the life of some other women pioneers through their own words -- women who assumed a male identity upon settling into western towns, their transformations so complete as to not be discovered until after death.

Charley Parkhurst was a well-known stagecoach driver in California for close to thirty years, driving teams between the gold rush towns of the Sierra Nevada, and later to San Jose and Santa Cruz. Parkhurst also opened a saloon and worked a brief stint as a lumberjack before passing on December 29, 1879. Such was Parkhurst's notoriety that the San Francisco Morning Call obituary praised:

He was one of the most dexterous and famous of the California drivers, ranking with Foss, Hank Monk, and George Gordon, and it was an honor to be striven for to occupy the spare end of the driver's seat when the fearless Charley Parkhurst held the reins of a four or six in hand.

But just a few days later, the papers announced that Charley had been a woman. The Sacramento Daily Bee published the news:

On Sunday last, there died a person known as Charley Parkhurst, who was well-known to old residents as a stage driver. He was in early days accounted one of the most expert manipulators of the reins who ever sat on the box of a coach. It was discovered when friendly hands were preparing him for his final rest, that Charley Parkhurst was unmistakably a well-endowed female, but further examination revealed that Charley had given birth to a child.

As her history surfaced into the public eye, it was discovered that she had run away from an orphanage as a child. Dressed in the clothes of a boy, Charley had been adopted by the owner of a livery stable in Providence, Rhode Island and trained for the stage coach profession as his son.

It would be a treasure to discover the personal journal of a lady who lived such a guise in the mid-19th century, but their tales remained unwritten in their own hands. Nonetheless, the story of Joe Monahan can be used to illustrate how someone might live this unusual life. Bill Schnabel, a rancher from Owyhee County, Idaho describes Joe in this letter to the Postmaster in Buffalo, New York:

January 6, 1904

Dear Sir:

There died near here a little man, known to all frontiersmen, such as miners,

cowboys, etc., as Joe Monahan. He never revealed his identity and all cowboys respected him. He was a small, beardless man with hands, feet, stature, and voice of a woman. He never told a word to his best friends who he was or what he was. He often addressed letters to a Walters family in Buffalo, and possibly has relatives there.

Now poor Joe is dead, and the long and deep mystery is cleared up. He is a woman. He has fought his way through with many of us, suffering hardships and hunger, but never whimpering. He made money once in the mines and lost all, then started again in cattle raising. The cowboys treated him with utmost respect, and he was always welcome to eat and sleep at their camps. Joe was always recluse, kept his door bolted while in his dugout and seldom invited a visitor in.

He has quite a bit of property in cattle and a few horses. If anyone knows the whereabouts of any remaining heirs in Buffalo, please contact me.

Sincerely yours,

Wm. Schnabel

Sources: Those Daring Stage Drivers by Kathi Bristo, California State Parks, Interpretation and Education Division, 2008; Women Won the West by Jacquie Rogers, researched from records of the Owyhee County Historian.