

Southwest Frontier Molls and Mollies

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Southwest frontier women, both “ladies” and “molls,” probably were the most influential human element in the development of Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas between 1850-1900. These women who were gun runners, cotton pickers, homemakers, rodeo queens, ranchers, entrepreneurs, and prostitutes brought civilized stability to communities. They provided the diverse cultural fabric of society, and aided in broadening, yet sharply defining, women’s sphere of acceptable behavior. They feared God, creatively coped with daily survival, participated fully in times of revelry, envisioned a petticoat utopia, and they endured.

The resourcefulness of women in providing merriment in their lives was just as creative as their resourcefulness in meeting the demands of survival and daily tasks. For many these diversions included participating in dances or fandangos, Saturday night socials, celebrations, buffalo hunts, horse racing, target shooting, aquatics, card playing, trecho and pesarita, and tarrantula or armadilla races. For a few molls their diversions were often accepted during the 1890-1880 period but seldom condoned by 1900, especially by the more “respectable” mollies. These activities included fandango dancing, monte and faro gambling, knife throwing, horse whipping, and amusements of lesser virtue.

Some women who participated in noncondoned lifestyles and revelry have become heroines of legends throughout the Southwest. Pauline Bushman who learned as a young girl in the Indian Territories to guide the frailest of canoes through the rapids later used this skill while serving as a Union spy in Tennessee, and in tracking down her errant husband Jere. Arizona Mary lost a shooting contest and had to supply her amorous services free for 3 days to the winner. Parker Alice, Bowlegged Mary, and Faro Nell were noted for their dexterity in dealing cards. When Sarah Burgett, prostitute/madam during the Mexican War, died in 1866 she was buried with full military honors reflecting the country’s gratitude for serviced rendered. Sadie Orchard, a stage coach driver in Arizona, was renowned for her bullwhip accuracy. Sally Scull, a Texas rancher and champion “cusser,” matched her race horses against any challengers. Two of the Southwest’s most notorious women bandits, Rose Dunn and Belle Starr were widely known for their expertise in poker, shooting, and riding as well as their outlaw gang activities.

Each of these women lived during a turbulent period during which the idealized Victorian standards depicted in Eastern magazines did not match the necessities of reality on the Southwest frontier. Though they may have flaunted traditional behavioral standards they performed their duties as home makers, loyal companions, and mothers. They were adventuresome, self reliant, creative and optimistic and their sporting activities were an integral aspect of their lives and passions. They lived hard and they played hard. The stakes were high and these gritty women played to win.