Mining for Monahan in Idaho: The Truth/Untruth about Josephine/Johanna/Joe/Jo

Where do you begin, when you search for a ghost? They eased down into the sliding dirt of the hillside cemetery; their breaths swarmed and steamed the chilled mountain air. They hugged the tombstones, wrapped their arms around the graves of early pioneers, miners, and shopkeepers. They pressed their ears into the cold stone and listened. Whispers, whispers of stories about her, they heard. Whispers of a shadowed woman who roamed the deepest parts of the mine, the sounds of her boots echoed as she eased over collapsed timbering and crumbling rock, and traveled deeper and deeper. They heard these whispers and went back; back there, to the place where it started. They too breathed the stagnant air as a faint light cast a soft glow in the darkest dark. In the depths, the light caught her dimmed face, they glimpsed her boots, saw her small hand graze the jagged wall, and it was enough. They knew it was her. The mine shook with blasts and booms as boulders, rocks, small stones, spilled and piled high. They buried her deep in the mine, where it all began.

It started when Joe traveled to Idaho and ripped apart the Owyhee Mountains. Slashed and sliced mountainside to search for something, something like gold or something like silver, Joe searched for possibilities; possibilities provided by Silver City and the American western frontier. In the 1860s, Joe peeled away layer after layer of soil and rock, waded through shadowed hollows, digging and digging.

Traveling to Silver City, Idaho in 2014, the mountains were punctured and gaping and Joe Monahan was somewhere deep inside them. Buried beneath the wreckage and weight of over one hundred years of stories, the truth about Joe Monahan no longer casts the faintest of light amidst the overwhelming rubble. They claimed to have found her, the woman who dressed and
lived as a man in nineteenth century Idaho. Newspaper articles, plays, and films declared the mystery of Joe Monahan solved, and their words like boulders, stacked high to bury Monahan and let the story rest. To find Joe again demanded digging through ruins in the near-darkness as soft voices of the few who knew Joe Monahan seeped from cracks in the surface, destabilizing existing narratives and enticing deeper excavations; to search harder for Joe, to keep digging and digging.

These hushed voices spoke of Josephine Monahan as a woman who traveled west in the 1860s to adopt a new identity as a male called “Joe”. They remained mere whispers in confronting the dynamitic booms and blasts of reductionist narratives that buried the complexity of Joe’s gender in darkness. Stories and tales emerged almost immediately following the examination of Joe’s cold, lifeless body in 1904 as the news spread across the territory that a woman had been living in secret as a man for nearly forty years. The response to Joe’s story exploded and most who read about Joe Monahan understood her conversion from female to male to be born out of necessity. Joe Monahan was in hiding according to a range of newspaper stories, journal articles, a play, and a film whose publication spanned from 1904 to 2003. They said she craved the dark cover of the mines, the overall anonymity the West provided. Was Joe just taking cover in Idaho, hiding from a storm of eastern propriety? Or does the echoing story of a girl that always liked to dress as a boy tell a different story? Identifying Joe as a transsexual, a woman who self-identified as male, may have been too loud of a story and too far outside the scope of a rigidly gender stratified nineteenth century reality. Although there are many examples of transsexuals, transvestites, and homosexuals living in the West during this time period, the notion that the western frontier was a transformative, open and welcoming space for society’s gender deviants had too many consequences. Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 declaration that
the frontier had closed implied that the West was culturally and socially integrating with the East.¹ How could notions of eastern propriety and social correctness combine with the gender deviations Joe Monahan symbolized in the West? The stories of Joe Monahan’s life in Idaho heteronormalized and redirected her gender experimentation to fit within the confines of socially constructed gender norms, burying notions of Joe’s transsexual identity in the weight of fantastic narratives, and ultimately conveyed the closing of the frontier as a truly transformative and experimental space.

The black and white image of a debutante dressed in a hoop skirt with curled hair reminded readers, as the title of the 1904 *Rocky Mountain News Article* stated, “Cowboy Jo was a Woman!” Cowboy Jo (dropping the established “e” on Josephine’s nickname) was not a man. Josephine Monahan shed her skirts to sling guns and tame wild horses, but underneath her spurs and boots, was a woman of eastern refinement. Josephine left New York after loving “not wisely but too well a villain by whom she was deserted in her darkest hour.” Josephine loved the “villain” despite the fact that he threw her to the streets and discarded impregnated Josephine. Unmarried and with child, the prestigious shine of her wealthy and privileged upbringing did nothing to save her from the cold darkness of rejection and poverty. Leaving the child with her sister, Josephine set out “to begin life anew in the West, that was then offering homes for the outcasts of all lands”, and as the writer further described, “the brave little woman decided to don the conventional attire of the male sex, discarding her own dress with her past.” Brave little Jo sought the literal and symbolic openness of the West to escape the imprisonment of poverty as a social outcast in the East.²
The detonation of the 1904 *Rocky Mountain News* article snapped some timbering and raw wood supports collapsed as stilted earth and constricted words and phrases spilled out and formed the first instance of debris blockades. Like a ripple, more explosions followed.

The 2003 film, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, told of Monahan leaving her child behind in New York and first arriving in Silver City, Idaho in the 1860s to take a turn at mining before the great offenses of prostitution, gambling, drinking, and other aspects of life in a western mining town overwhelmed her. Jo then sought the solitude of the Owyhee Mountains and earned a living by shepherding. Years later she purchased land and built a small cabin next to Succor Creek. A Chinese laborer, known as Tinman Wong in the film, was the only character who embraced Jo’s true sex. Their love affair lasted through the second half of the film, despite conflicts between the two as they navigated the complexities of Jo’s hidden cross-dressing existence. In one exchange, Jo asserted the necessity for secrecy to her partner and stated: “What do you think they’ll do if they find out I’m a woman? They’ll kill us.” Their love lasted until Tinman Wong’s death from sickness and Josephine died soon after. Her body was examined in Ruby City and as her neighbors and acquaintances prepared to drink a round to commemorate the memory of Jo Monahan, the undertaker interrupted them with a devastating discovery—little Jo was a woman! Shock and confusion ensued, followed by a neighbor returning to Jo’s homestead to destroy it, as he screamed Jo “made a fool out of me”. The film ended with Jo’s body propped on a horse as reporters attempted to capture a picture of the female cowboy. *Ballad of Little Joe* ignited notions that gender deviations were possible but not accepted in the West, and after the film struck, its explosions created the final wreckage and buried Joe Monahan.

The *Rocky Mountain News* article and the film gave readers tunnel vision in narrowing Joe Monahan’s identity as a female cross-dresser whose primary aim was rejecting patriarchy.
She was a victim of male oppression in the East, as Joe’s lover threw her and their unborn child away, until discarded petticoats liberated Joe in the West. The 1904 *Rocky Mountain News* article that announced “Cowboy Jo was a Woman!” explained Joe’s gender transformation and more importantly, justified it for eastern readers. Josephine had a reason to become Joe. The article outlined her sad circumstances and invited pity and compassion. *The Ballad of Little Jo* equally justified her deception and also displayed her bravery, strength, and capacity for survival. Josephine Monahan was no “gentle tamer” of the American West. Instead she was one of Frederick Jackson Turner’s rugged individuals embodying resilience and independence.\(^5\) Despite such amiable qualities, her neighbors and community responded negatively and even violently to the truth about Joe Monahan, and thereby implicated the West as a less open and friendly space and negotiated with the 1904 news article’s assumption that the frontier welcomed outcasts and misfits. By shutting the door on Joe’s gender deviation, these stories opened the window to let in the eastern breeze. From one window there is one perspective, a tunnel of vision guided by narratives that made sense of Joe’s behavior in the context of existing gender norms. Perhaps outside, beyond in the periphery is where Joe Monahan lies, buried beneath the rubble of such stories, surrounded by the total darkness of those Silver City mines, where it all started.

Sometime after it began, it ended. It ended in the cold winter months of 1904. Joe Monahan coughed and coughed, lying on the on the couch in Barney and Kate Malloy’s home for weeks, because he could not go on. Joe Monahan was leading his cattle and horses to the valley to range for the colder months in late 1903. But he could not go on. He stayed with the Malloy’s for several more weeks, but his sickness only grew worse as winter wore on and a strong fit of coughing led to his death on January 5, 1904. Monahan’s speculated age at the time
of his death in 1904 was fifty-three. By then he lived in Southwestern Idaho and the Owyhee Mountains for forty years. Upon his death, his estate included one hundred head of cattle. It did not really start there, in the Owyhee Mountains. Rather in Buffalo, New York, where Johanna Monahan was plucked from the grips of her abusive, alcoholic father by the affluent Mrs. Katherine Walter. Katherine Walter answered an advertisement in a local newspaper seeking the next of kin of Joe Monahan. William Schnabel contacted the chief of police in Buffalo after Joe’s death, and then the advertisement was posted. William Schnabel worked with Joe Monahan some years before his death and Monahan had occasionally entrusted Schnabel to post letters for him. Schnabel recalled that these letters were written to someone in Buffalo, New York. Mrs. Katherine Walter answered the advertisement claiming to be the foster mother of “Johanna Monahan”. Walter said that at the age of fourteen, Johanna headed west to make her fortune in mining. How Monahan was able to do so was never clarified. The letters that Monahan consistently sent were assumed to be correspondences between Katherine Walter and her daughter, Anna. Letters were found at Joe’s Succor Creek home, presumably the aforementioned correspondences. They were found sometime after Joe died, after his body was prepared and buried, as his home sat empty in the quiet solemnity of the Owyhee Mountains which spanned Idaho and Oregon.

Fred Palmer, a merchant in Oregon, was in charge of Monahan’s estate and received a letter from Katherine Walter soon after Monahan’s death was reported in Buffalo. Palmer explained the contents of the letter to Idaho newspapers and helped paint a picture of Monahan’s life in Buffalo before moving West. Katherine Walter stated in the letter that Johanna Monahan’s mother “always dressed her in boy’s clothes and let her earn her own living by running errands and selling newspapers.” After Walter adopted Johanna, she was sent away to school and
reformed as a proper young lady. Fred Palmer told newspapers that Monahan actually headed west in 1869, first traveling to California before moving to Idaho. Records indicated his first whereabouts in Idaho were in Silver City, Idaho, according to the 1870 federal census. Other reports alleged that Monahan earned enough money mining in Silver City to then purchase land in Succor Creek, on the Idaho/Oregon border, in 1883. He was quiet and kept to himself, according to his neighbors, and managed to construct a small cabin and fenced forty acres to contain his one cow and one horse. Monahan was known as a lonely fellow, but maintained his civic responsibility and voted in every election. There was at least one recorded example of Monahan voting in the Republican primary in August 1880. It was noted in several newspapers that Monahan was good with a gun and had a talent for working with horses. Joe Monahan was a cowboy, after all.

The death of an aged cowboy living on the rugged frontier was certainly not an abnormal event. It was only after preparing Monahan’s body for the funeral that his friendly, longtime neighbors realized that ‘he’ was a ‘she’. Or had they known all along? William Schnabel’s letters to the Buffalo police explained that “it was always surmised that Joe was a woman […] He was a small, beardless, little man with hands, feet, stature, and voice of a woman.” Records of the 1880 census further complicated the story that Joe Monahan lived in secret as a woman. Ezra Mills served as the census enumerator at the time, and was Monahan’s close neighbor. For Monahan’s sex, Mills recorded “M” (male), but then wrote in pencil next to it “Doubtful Sex.” Joe Monahan’s neighbors and friends clearly doubted his gender, but never questioned it openly, at least according to William Schnabel. Schnabel wrote, “He would never reveal his identity and all cowboys respected him”. Joe Monahan was a respected cowboy. Joe Monahan as a he or
she did not matter to his/her neighbors because his/her character created a lasting echo, something which spoke far louder than the alleged deception of Joe’s transsexualism.

They seemed like such gentle echoes. One lone voice hung from the edges of a scar and every word together spoke of Joe Monahan’s small feet and small hands, a face that never needed shaving and a feminine voice, and every word together tore the scar wider and wider until a steady stream of water poured from the mine’s wall. Another crawled deeper into a hollow and burrowed and burrowed, until a gush of water surged the voice forward: “As the 1880 census enumerator, do I record Joe Monahan’s sex as male or female?” Yet another slithered into a seam and pierced with a cry, recalling the childhood of a girl that was really a boy, until the mine’s stitching had been completely undone and just as soon as it trickled, water swelled and surged.

The flood of information from Joe Monahan’s neighbors signified that Johanna Monahan moved west to live openly. She sought the frontier not to hide, but to live in the open as a man. Katherine Walters gave no indication that Johanna Monahan was running or hiding from her life in Buffalo, New York. Instead Walters illuminated an important aspect of Johanna’s identity and countered the “brave little woman” image of her depicted in various media. Walters identified Johanna as a girl that acted like a boy from a young age. Johanna became Joe, not solely so she could escape patriarchy and male oppression, but also because she was a man. Joe was a transsexual and he identified the American West as a safe space to live as he wished. The American West gave Johanna the opportunity to shed the strict gender stratifications emblematized by eastern society and cross those lines to be the man he always felt he was.
The American West as a transformative space, a place where the misfits and outcasts of society could live and prosper, was identified as quintessential to the understanding of Joe Monahan’s story as early as 1904, with the publication of the *Rocky Mountain News* article following Joe’s death. The frontier was a gray space, distanced from centers of social and moral codes that regulated eastern society.\(^7\) The news article relied on this assumption to explain how a woman could dress as a man and live and prosper. But what does the existence of a woman like Josephine Monahan say about the American West and its people? The *Rocky Mountain News* excused them for not acknowledging Joe’s transgression because they were ignorant of Joe’s deception. *The Ballad of Little Joe* made Joe pay for her deceit and immorality. The film depicted her friend and close neighbor returning to Joe’s home and destroying it after the town was informed that Monahan was in fact, a woman. William Schnabel and Ezra Mills were neighbors and close friends to Joe Monahan, and indicated they knew the truth about Joe Monahan. Schnabel and Mills, and perhaps many others in the community, knew Joe was a woman but was she was accepted and acknowledged as a man. Cross-dressing was not a new phenomenon in Silver City and Succor Creek. The Silver City newspaper *Owyhee Avalanche* frequently recounted tales of women dressing as men during the time period.\(^8\) Thus the acceptance of Joe Monahan as a woman dressed as man was more feasible, given that the community was, at the very least, accustomed to the idea. Contrary to the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *The Ballad of Little Joe*, the people of the American West during the nineteenth century were more aware of gender transgressions and deviations than these stories imagined, and more importantly, the women and men that “crossed” were accepted and even respected, as evidenced by the response to the truth about Joe’s gender. A transsexual living more openly in late nineteenth century Idaho stirred the image of the American West as a place settled by white
pioneering men. Joe’s story, like a burst of cool water, refreshed and broadened the image of the frontier as a transformative space for men, women, and everyone in between.

Water burst and rolled through the mine, colliding in tunnels, surging and searching. She was found in the deepest parts of the mine, buried beneath the weight of exploded rock and debris. The wall collapsed under the water’s pressure, its foundations deeply disturbed and wavering in the great flood. The boulders and rock sunk beneath waves of water, drowning until their words carried no weight, until their stories imagined darkness, emptiness, nothingness.

Drowning the possibility of Joe Monahan’s transsexualism, the heteronormalized accounts of Joe Monahan’s life in Idaho contributed to a larger national effort in creating a gender normalized regional history of the American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Heteronormalization and heterosexualization referred to the efforts of the press and the media of the time period to explain the strong presence of transvestites and transsexuals (transgendered people) in the American West. The mythical Old West was heteronormalized at the turn of the century to balance frontier gender deviations and contextualize them according to existing gender stratifications. So Joe became “Jo” and she was given a troubled past to escape from, and a male lover to emphasize that she was not a transsexual or gender deviant, but a woman forced to hide her identity. The process of resexualizing and heteronormalizing people like Joe Monahan in the western frontier was completed exactly when the West entered into the modern era and incorporated into the rest of America. A gender normalized regional history was produced and distributed via the media at the birth of the modern United States.
In an 1893 speech, Frederick Jackson Turner analyzed the significance of the closing of the American frontier and argued that the frontier was “the line of rapid Americanization.” Turner relied on a late nineteenth century census to assert that the frontier line no longer existed and that most of the American West was populated. The closing of the frontier had many implications for America beyond merely being fully settled and occupied. According to Turner, the American West provided conditions for the creation of American identity and democracy. Many quintessentially American cultural traits could be traced back to the experiences of early pioneers that settled in Western territories, such as "that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things […] that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism.” Thus, the closure of the frontier meant a potential end of the development of American character and democracy, as Turner’s thesis ultimately implicated American identity. Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” was important in establishing the significance and uniqueness of the West, and his assertions that the frontier created individualistic democracy contributed greatly to the notion of the frontier as cultural, social, and political sphere separated from the East. At the turn of the twentieth century, the West was changing. Frederick Jackson Turner recognized the frontier was closed and more importantly, the American West would be fully integrating with the East. The West simply could not coexist with its eastern neighbors as the center for outcasts and outsiders of society, such as women who wished to dress and live as men. Through articles and stories, the transgendered experiences of women like Joe Monahan were reimagined. Heteronormalized regional histories developed as the frontier closed and the Wild West joined with the Enlightened East.
Where do you begin, when you search for a ghost? You think she will wholly emerge from the flooded mine, liberated from the weight of all those stones and words and the fantastical towering wall which once encased her, shake the water loose from her hair, and you will finally see her completely, as she is. All of those voices spoke deep truths, deep enough to crack the walls and pour waves of water until she was unburied and surged forward into the light of the Silver City sun. In the glare, you can make out his face, glimpse his boots, and see his hand fall to his side as he steps forward from the shadows. And then he is gone, eased into the bright spotlight of the western setting sun. You let him go.

They say that Silver City is haunted. Decaying buildings, dirt roads, and crumbling cemeteries are the physical memories of its nineteenth and twentieth century mining boom. They say spirits of early settlers haunt the old town that never seemed to move forward and modernize. Beyond Silver City, the state of Idaho is haunted by similar ghosts of the Old West. Ghosts of the rugged male adventurer, armed with individualism and determination, who settled the land and built the roads for pioneering families to establish traditions of hard work, family values, and fortitude, saturate notions of what was and what should be. Should Joe Monahan step from darkness and into the sun, should his story be included in the perception of the western frontier, perhaps Idaho could move forward and beyond the ghosts of the mythic Old West. Perhaps Idaho and its government could begin to understand, in the present moment, the cause and spirit of hundreds of protestors that block capital doors daily in pursuit of protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.\textsuperscript{23} If not to recognize the demands of Idaho citizens, then to recognize Joe and other transgender pioneers like him who traveled West in the nineteenth century in pursuit of the same freedom and liberty of the frontier, to live openly and to be exactly who they were.
Notes


2 “Cowboy Jo was a Woman!”, Rocky Mountain News, 23, March 1904.


8 Idaho Daily Statesman, 9 April 1904, 6.


12 Owyhee Avalanche, 4 September 1880, 3.


18 Owyhee Avalanche, 4 November 1872, 4.


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