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Ella Knowles Haskell (1860-1911)

Ella grew up in Northwood, New Hampshire. She attended Bates College in Maine. At Bates she was the first woman to receive honors in oratory and composition, and she became one of the school’s first female graduates in 1884.

In 1887 Ella fell ill with tuberculosis and was recommended by her doctor to move to a dryer climate to improve her health. She moved to Helena, Montana Territory, in 1888.

Over her first year in Helena she studied law, and within that same year she was appointed as the first female notary public in Montana history. At that time, Montana prohibited women from taking the bar exam and from practicing law. Ella successfully lobbied the Montana legislature to allow women to practice law, which subsequently resulted in a state bill permitting qualified people to practice law “without regard to sex.” In 1889, Ella became the first woman admitted to the bar to practice before the Supreme Court of Montana, and in 1890 she received credentials that enabled her to practice before the Circuit Court of the United States.

In 1892 (22 years before Montana women received the right to vote), Ella ran for the office of State Attorney General. She became the first woman in the nation to run for such an office. She was not elected, but impressed her opponent so much that he hired her as an assistant state attorney. In 1902, she moved to Butte and began her own practice based in mining law. She also became the owner/operator of several local mining properties. Throughout her life in Montana she promoted the suffrage movement and was an eloquent and persuasive speaker for the cause of women’s rights.

sources:
https://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/education/Montanans/haskell.pdf
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Sarah Gammon Bickford (1855-1931)

Sarah was born a slave on Christmas day 1855 on the Blair Plantation near Greensboro, North Carolina. Her parents were sold when she was very young, and she never saw them again. In 1870, seven years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued which made Sarah a free person, Sarah was offered a job caring for the children of a judge in Virginia City, Montana Territory. Soon afterward the family moved away from the Territory and back to the States, but Sarah stayed and worked as a chambermaid in a Virginia City hotel. Between two marriages Sarah gave birth to seven children, two of whom died of diphtheria. While raising her family in the early 1880’s, Sarah began her career as an entrepreneur, operating the New City Bakery in Virginia City, which took in boarders and offered meals and lunches, fresh bread, cakes, and pies at all hours.

In 1888 Sarah and her husband, Stephen, purchased a two-thirds share of the water system that supplied drinking water to Virginia City. In 1890 they purchased “Fisher’s Garden,” a vegetable and fruit farm east of Virginia City from which she sold produce and poultry to the surrounding community. After Stephen died in 1900, Sarah continued on her path as a business owner, gaining a small farm, several city lots, interests in gold mining claims, share of stock in the Southern Montana Telegraph and Electric Company, and she acquired the remaining one-third share of the Water Company, assuming full control over the company and managing all company matters. As sole owner of the Virginia City Water Company, Sarah became the only African American woman in Montana and possibly in the United States to own a utility company.

source:
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Susie Walking Bear Yellowtail (1903-1981)

An orphan in the care of missionary foster parents, Susie learned English and attended boarding school in Pryor, Montana, on the Crow reservation. She translated for her fellow students in the classroom, from English to their Apsáalooke language. In her teens, Susie attended Northfield Seminary in Massachusetts. Her guardian Mrs. C.A. Field paid her tuition, but Susie earned her own room and board by working as a housemaid and a babysitter. After graduation, Susie continued her education by enrolling at Boston City Hospital’s School of Nursing. She graduated with honors in 1923. In 1927, Susie Walking Bear became the first registered nurse of Crow descent and one of the first degreed registered nurses of American Indian ancestry in the United States.

Susie returned to the Crow Reservation, working first at the government-run hospital at Crow Agency and then traveling to other reservations as a consultant for the Public Health Service. Wherever she went, she observed the appalling living conditions and unmet health-care needs on the reservations and the need for cultural competency among medical professionals working with indigenous people. She advocated for improved health care, better access to care, and better living conditions for American Indians. She also advocated for better education for American Indians and promoted Crow culture through involvement in events such as the annual All-American Indian Days, with the belief that education and involvement would improve the situation of native peoples not by taking something essential from them but by giving them a chance to apply their cultural values in ways that built up their communities. She received the President’s Award for Outstanding Nursing Health Care and is included among the honorees in the Gallery of Outstanding Montanans in the Capitol Rotunda in Helena.

source:
https://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/education/Montanans/yellowtail.pdf
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Dr. Caroline M. McGill (1879-1959)

At a time when society was still awakening to recognize the value and capabilities of women, Caroline McGill was undaunted in pursuing a remarkable and dedicated professional career. She grew up in Ohio and excelled in primary school. In 1901 she graduated from the Lebanon Normal School with a lifetime teaching certificate. She pursued higher education at the University of Missouri and received a B.A. in science in 1904, a M.A. in zoology in 1905, and a Ph.D. in anatomy and physiology in 1908. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa and was the first woman to receive a doctorate from that institution.

In 1911 Caroline accepted a position at the Murray Hospital in Butte as Montana’s first trained pathologist. She received her M.D. in internal medicine from Johns Hopkins University in 1916 and opened her Butte office as an internist in the same year. Quickly she became known statewide for her diagnostic skills, her willingness to make house calls, and her expertise in immunology.

During the course of a forty-year career as a physician in Butte, Dr. McGill never married. She had a love of hunting which drew her to the Gallatin Canyon, where she purchased the 320 Ranch in 1936. Dr. McGill subsequently accumulated more than four thousand acres of land to protect access corridors to Yellowstone National Park. In 1959, she was named a Lifetime Member of the Montana Wilderness Association, honoring her commitment to regional conservation. Dr. McGill also had a passion for collecting historical items and antiques. Her collection became the core of a museum on Montana State University campus which later developed into the Museum of the Rockies.

source:
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Helen Piotopowaka Clarke (1848-1923)

Helen was born in 1848 to a Scottish-American fur trader, Malcom Clarke, and his Blackfeet wife, Cotch-co-co-na. She spent most of her childhood at a convent school in Cincinnati. As a young woman she returned to Montana but her stay was short-lived and full of tragedy. With conflict rising between the local Blackfeet tribes and the white peoples who were colonizing indigenous lands, disputes broke out and Helen’s father was killed by her Blackfeet cousin, Ne-tus-che-o. Helen quickly moved away to New York where she became an actress with a successful career in the big city and internationally, appearing onstage in London, Paris, and Berlin.

Eventually, Helen returned to Montana where she distinguished herself as a teacher. In 1882 she ran for Lewis and Clark County school superintendent. She was one of the first two women – and the only person of Indian descent – to hold elective office in Montana Territory. She held the office for three terms.

Helen never married. Holding the deep understanding that her father’s murder was the act of a few vengeful individuals and not the desire of the Blackfeet nation, Helen applied for her tribal status and moved to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in 1902. She worked as a government allotment agent, interpreting and describing new laws to tribal members and helping to assign portions of reservation lands to individuals for them to live on and farm. While doing this work she witnessed unlawful prejudices that government agents were committing against tribal peoples and rose up to challenge them. One agent had erased over ninety percent of tribal members from the list of people registered to receive government food rations. Clarke successfully pursued charges against the agent and he was replaced in 1905.

sources:
https://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/education/Montanans/HClarke.pdf
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Evelyn Cameron (1868-1929)

Evelyn was born in 1868 to an aristocratic family near Streatham, England. In 1889, she married Ewen Cameron, a Scottish man. The newlyweds came to Montana for their honeymoon. Enchanted with the badlands of Eastern Montana, the Camerons decided to move to America and raise polo ponies for export to Europe. In 1893 they established the Eve Ranch near Terry, Montana. However, the horse breeding venture proved disastrous, as the ponies were difficult to transport and many died on board the ship to England. The surviving animals that did safely arrive overseas were too wild for English riders, who were unaccustomed to “breaking” wild horses. Since they were unable to make a profit, the Camerons abandoned pony raising and re-focused their dedication to ranching, farming, and housing boarders. Evelyn fully took over managing and running the ranch, and her husband Ewen became an ornithologist and wrote articles on Montana birdlife.

One of Evelyn’s boarders introduced her to photography, and in 1894 she bought her first camera. Her stark and vivid photography captured the experiences of men and women on the plains of Eastern Montana. Magazines throughout the country published her work. In addition to her ranch work and photography, Evelyn was an avid diarist, keeping remarkably detailed accounts of her daily life on the rugged Montana frontier. In one of her letters Evelyn wrote with bold and inspiring resolve, “Manual labour is about all I care about, and after all, is what will really make a strong woman. I like to break colts, brand calves, cut down trees, ride, and work in the garden.” The combination of her photography, diaries and letters to family in England provide a unique and unparalleled view into Montana’s past.

sources:
https://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/education/Montanans/E Cameron.pdf
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Mattie Castner (1848-1920)

Mattie was born into slavery in Newton, North Carolina in 1848. After the emancipation proclamation freed her when she was fifteen, she traveled to St. Louis where she worked as a housekeeper and hotel maid. She was hired as a nanny and while caring for the children of the Sire family, the Sires moved to Fort Benton, Montana Territory. Mattie agreed to keep her engagement with the family and made the journey to Montana.

Soon after her arrival in Fort Benton, Mattie took a job as a laundress at the Overland Hotel. She eventually opened up her own laundry business. While in Fort Benton she met a young man named John Castner who was a freighter and coal miner. He had discovered coal formations in a valley thirty-five miles to the southwest along Belt Creek and filed mining claims there. Mattie married John and the couple moved to Belt Creek and settled in a log cabin right on the creek crossing. For forty years the Castners pursued commercial endeavors both together and separately. They expanded and made additions to their cabin in order to use it as a boarding house. Mattie opened and managed the Castner Hotel, the main stopping place for travelers taking the stagecoach between Great Falls and Lewistown, and around which the town of Belt grew. She was known to be an exquisite cook, and her hotel dining room had a reputation for hospitality, elegance, and excellence that spread across the Territory and attracted diners form many miles away. When her husband John died, Maddie inherited his accumulation of mining prospects, making her the largest single landowner in Belt. She donated most or her inherited estate items – nearly $25,000 in value – to local charities.

sources:
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Mary Long Alderson (1860-1940)

Mary was born in Weymouth, Massachusetts in 1860. She grew up and was educated there, and became a school teacher. At the age of 27 she married Matt Alderson and the couple moved to Bozeman where Matt and his father ran and published the Bozeman Avant Courier newspaper. Mary took on writing as a job and quickly established herself as a respected journalist. She was among the few female members of the Montana Press Association, and served as the president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) as well as the editor of the organization’s journal. The WCTU stood for “standards of morals for men and women in equal rights, in a living wage, in an eight-hour day, and equal pay for equal work.” Mary’s writing encouraged women among both the WCTU Journal’s and the Courier’s readership to advocate for women’s rights. In 1902 she wrote a chapter for the research work, “History of Woman Suffrage: 1883-1900,” that focused on Montana’s specific suffrage history. In this chapter she noted that most teachers in Montana were women, 885 to 201, but the women’s average pay was $48.61 per month compared to the men’s pay of $69.28. For this important journalism she received a letter of commendation and thanks from Susan B. Anthony.

In 1911, Mary joined Jeanette Rankin and other lead feminist organizers at a joint session of the Montana Legislature, to testify in favor of women’s suffrage. Four years later in 1914 the bill passed giving Montana women the right to vote. Montana was a leader in this regard and Mary was among the driving forces in that success. U.S. Congress did not pass the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution until six years later in 1920.

source:
https://montanaseniornews.com/mary-long-alderson-montana-woman-suffragist/
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Jeanette Rankin (1880-1973)

Jeanette was born in 1880 near Missoula, Montana Territory. She graduated from the University of Montana in 1902 with a degree in biology but did not pursue a career in science. On a visit to see relatives in Boston and San Francisco she witnessed harsh poverty and slums for the first time. She was appalled by the plight of poor women and children who had no political voice with which to demand a better life, and decided to try to help by becoming a social worker.

After a year in social work she was disheartened to see that the system meant to care for children was badly mistreating them. She resolved that a more effective way to stop social injustice would be to influence legislation. She became an organizer and proponent of the suffrage movement and in 1913 was hired by the National American Suffrage Association and lobbied for women’s suffrage in fifteen states, including Montana. In 1914, Montana became the eleventh state to grant women the right to vote and the right to hold public office.

Jeannette recognized that it would be easier to push a suffrage bill through national Congress if a woman were among its members. She ran a campaign in her home state of Montana, touring widely and meeting voters at their workplaces and places of recreation to speak with them in person. In 1916 Montanans elected her the first congresswoman in U.S. History. During her first term in Congress, Jeannette sponsored legislation to aid women and children, and pushed hard for a federal suffrage amendment. She was also among fifty-five of her fellow congressmen who voted against the United States declaring war on Germany and entering World War I.

source:
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Pretty Shield (1856 - 1944)

Pretty Shield was born in 1856 among the Crow tribe in north-eastern Montana near what is now the town of Winifred. Around the time that Pretty Shield turned three years old, her aunt lost her husband and two daughters when their village was attacked by Sioux. The woman mourned for so long and grew so thin and weak that Pretty Shield's mother gave Pretty Shield to her aunt, and she moved to her aunt's village.

As a young girl Pretty Shield had joys, adventures, and sometimes dangers living on the plains. She and her childhood friends would play games, racing horses and kicking a ball made by stuffing antelope hair into the sac of skin that surrounds a buffalo heart. Since the roots and berries that Crow women were in charge of gathering were the same foods eaten by bears, Pretty Shield told multiple stories of close calls with Grizzly Bears, one of which resulted in the death of another woman.

Pretty Shield married and had five children, but she lost two of them as infants. Crow people were known to mourn intensely when loved ones died. After her children's deaths, Pretty Shield wandered alone in the hills beyond her camp for two months, eating and sleeping very little. She had a medicine-dream, returned to her village and became a healer using knowledge of traditional plants and customs to heal sick people.

Pretty Shield lived through the rapid changes of oppression, massacre, relocation and assimilation that was imposed on Crow and all native American peoples by the U.S. Government. Pretty Shield loved her culture and never gave it up completely. She kept her medicine bag and taught her children and grandchildren how to gather and use traditional plants. In her old age she told the stories of her people to authors and historians so that her life and memories of Crow people and culture would be chronicled and not forgotten.

sources: Bold Women in Montana History, by Beth Judy
More Than Petticoats: Remarkable Montana Women, by Gail Shirley