

Hello and welcome back to World Herstory, the podcast that discovers the lives and legacies of lesser-known, badass women from around the world and throughout history. I'm your host, Tabitha Bear, a traveling multimedia specialist with a passion for discovering the hidden tales of the amazing women who have helped shape our lives today.

In this week's episode, we're exploring the western frontier of the United States in the late 1800's and discussing the foundation and development of Seattle. Sure, we'll touch on the lumber industry, the beautiful Puget Sound, and the Indigenous population, but we're getting real saucy and bringing the sex workers to the forefront. We're also going to learn about the immigration status of a few nationalities to give an idea of what the US was like at the time, and see the conservative side of women's influence in politics and social conduct - especially as it began to apply to an anti-prostitution movement that still impacts the government of women's bodies today.

We'll discuss the Sons of Profit - who were the founders of Seattle, we'll learn about the "seamstresses" of Seattle, we'll talk about those pioneering women who challenged the traditional roles and careers of a woman, and provide some extra focus on one of the Sons of Profit, Madam Lou Graham.

With so much happening in the mid to late 1800's in the United States, where do we even start with the background history that leads to the creation of Seattle?

Let's start with the Oregon Trail:

It was a wagon trail stretching 2170 miles from Missouri to Willamette Valley, Oregon. From the 1840's to 1880's, it's estimated that 300,000 - 500,000 thousand people attempted the Oregon Trail. And I say attempted, because it was rather a harsh journey and not everyone made it.

The Oregon Trail lost its popularity due to the increase of railroads, which were a faster and safer way to travel out west. The railways quickly connected the eastern part of the country with the new western territories of the United States, specifically the Northwest.

The first people to really traverse the Oregon trail were fur traders, mountain men turned lumberers, explorers, etc. But mostly men. Their families stayed behind - this detail is incredibly important to the creation of Seattle, because the lack of women created an opportunity to fill the void of loneliness that emerged.

During this time, a lot of Indigenous tribes along the trail were keen to avoid any type of conflict, and instead supplied food and general supplies crucial to survival for those passing through to the west.

Businessmen tried to scoop up land through deals, treaties, and good old fashioned finders-keepers in the west and create new opportunities for growth, or a lot of fur traders started in the west and set up trades making their way back east. Either way, there was this boom in business, especially fur.

There was also the Gold Rush in the late 1840's that started to drive people to California and create settlements there.

Life for women on the Oregon Trail was incredibly difficult. They already faced traditional roles of wife and mother and household caretaker back east, but it intensified on the trail. There was this newfound daily urgency of survival placed upon their shoulders. Unknown diseases and treacherous paths around every corner asked a lot more of their capacity to conform to this stereotype.

However, as women traveled out west, they found that this was a new opportunity to create a role. There was no societal norm as there were only Indigenous peoples - a lot of whom believed in a matriarchal society - and lush forests and vast river systems. This was a whole new world.

A lot of women who did travel out west started to become more politically involved, especially since there technically weren't any laws from forbidding it. They were more involved in businesses or starting businesses and became more outspoken, but most importantly - had the even playing field as men - they could reinvent themselves.

Towards the end of the 1800's, women gained the right to vote in Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, and Utah - all out west.

The west seemed more progressive and lucrative in various degrees, if you were white.

There was a strong sense of xenophobia, especially with regard to Chinese immigrants that arrived in the west due to the gold rush, and the rumor of a gold mountain. Not only did they face the disappointing reality that there was no 'gold mountain', but they faced extreme and violent racism.

They were met with hostility from white locals, and everything about the west was an unfortunate pipe dream. As railways expanded, Chinese immigrants found work building the railroads. They were paid poorly, and the job was ridiculously dangerous with a high rate of death.

Chinese immigrants faced an epidemic of racist attacks. They were forced out of business, out of town; they were beaten, tortured, lynched...it was a massacre. And with weak government in new territories, while this was altruistic for some, it was problematic for others.

Then there was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prevented immigration from China for 10 years. That was renewed with strength in 1892 with the Geary Act, and made permanent in 1902. It wasn't until 1943, at the height of WWII, that the Chinese Exclusion Act was swept away.

All of this was put in place against Chinese immigrants when only 322,000 entered, or re-entered the US from the 1840's to the 1880's. Which is nothing compared to the millions of immigrants the East Coast received from Europe.

In the 1850's, nearly one million Germans emigrated to America. With the failed German Revolution of 1848 that resulted in land seizures, unemployment, and increased competition from British goods, prospects seemed bright in the industrious US.

Steamships replaced sailing ships making the transatlantic journey easier, safer, and quicker to tolerate.

By the 1860's, 1.3 million Germans were living in the United States and there were over 200 German language magazines and newspapers in circulation - 7 in St. Louis, Missouri alone.

Antisemitic violence was on the rise, driving thousands of German-Jews to flee, as well.

More than 5 million people left Germany for the United States during the 19th century.

Most of them settled in Ohio and Missouri, where it was affordable and cultivated the fertile land near the great lakes. They started building the foundation of the nation's agriculture.

German immigrants had an immediate and profound impact on American culture. They launched kindergarten classes, introduced physical education and vocational education into public schools, and influenced the inclusion of gymnasiums in schools and were leading advocates for universal education.

Now, it's very important to note Missouri keeps popping up in conversation here - this is where the Oregon Trail started. This is where that itch to go west was running rampant with everyone.

A lot of Germans joined early settlers in the Pacific Northwest.

From an Indigenous perspective, life was not good. From the 1860's to the 1880's, there was an aggressive hunt for bison, leaving them nearly extinct. This created a new dependency from the Indigenous peoples on the US government. A major way of life was taken from them in a short amount of time.

In 1876, Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho defeated Lieutenant Colonel George Custer.

And starting in the late 1880's, the epidemic of Residential Schools started to make their way through the Indigenous communities. Residential Schools took native children from their families where they dressed them in "normal clothes", cut their long hair off, forbade them from speaking their native languages and tried to teach them vocational trades and the white way of life.

My own great-great grandmother was a victim of the Residential School system. She was taken from her family, put through the school system, and "adopted" by a white family in Kentucky. When she was older, she moved to Maine and lived her life as a lobster catcher, creating friendships with the local Indigenous peoples there and keeping to herself.

These unfortunate events still leave a lasting impact on Native communities today.

Throughout this time, Indigenous people were still not seen as citizens of the US. A clause in the fourteenth amendment prevented Native men from voting. Tribes were seen as independent nations and were expected to sign agreements to establish native reservations in US territories. It wasn't until June 2, 1924 that Native Americans were granted US citizenship.

Starting in the 1860's, there was the development of women's clubs and associations. And they really started to emerge towards the 1890's, including African American women's clubs.

Clubs started by white and Black women tended to focus on very similar issues. Health, sanitation, education, women suffrage, and sometimes prohibition. However, Black women also focused on the end to lynching, combated racism and fought for racial uplift.

Mary Church Terrell founded the National Association of Colored Women, and their motto was “Lifting As We Climb”.

From 1880 - 1910, the number of women employed increased from 2.6 million to 7.8 million. 60% of women were employed as domestic servants because the majority of better paying positions went to men.

It's important to note, more women joined the workforce for two major reasons. After the Industrial Revolution, families went from being a unit of production, to a unit of consumption and there was a familial need to see income in more creative ways than trade or selling goods. The second reason? Feminism. Women wanted to do what they wanted to do.

Of course, we can't forget. From 1861 - 1865, America entered the Civil War. After four years of state separation and some horrific bloodshed, the Confederacy was defeated, resulting in the abolishment of slavery and the reunification of the states.

The late 1800's witnessed a significant social and cultural shift marked by the emergence of the Social Purity Movement and anti-prostitution protests. This movement was rooted in the broader context of the Victorian era, characterized by strict moral codes and societal expectations.

The Social Purity Movement emerged as a response to concerns about the perceived moral decay of society, with a particular focus on issues related to sexuality and the alleged exploitation of women. Advocates of social purity, often influenced by religious and moral convictions, sought to address perceived social ills, including prostitution, which was viewed as a threat to public morality.

The anti-prostitution protests were a crucial aspect of this movement. Activists, many of whom were women, campaigned against the practice of prostitution, linking it to the broader issues of poverty, inequality, and the exploitation of vulnerable women. The protests aimed to criminalize and eradicate prostitution, viewing it as a form of degradation for women and a symptom of societal moral decline.

While these movements were rooted in concerns about morality, they also had implications for the feminist movement of the late 19th century. Some feminists of the time were active in the Social Purity Movement, seeing it as a way to address issues like sexual exploitation and human trafficking and protect women from societal vices. However, this alliance was not without controversy within the feminist movement, as differing perspectives emerged.

The impact on feminism during this period was complex. On one hand, the Social Purity Movement provided a platform for women to engage in social activism and address issues affecting their gender. On the other hand, the movement's moralistic approach and the tendency to blame women for societal problems reflected the prevailing patriarchal attitudes of the time.

The legacy of the Social Purity Movement and anti-prostitution protests is multifaceted. While these movements had some positive outcomes, such as raising awareness about issues like sexual exploitation, they also reinforced traditional gender roles and stigmatized women involved in sex work.

Today, the impact of these movements can still be seen in debates surrounding sex work, feminism, and the attitudes towards women's autonomy. The tension between those advocating for the criminalization of sex work and those supporting the rights and agency of sex workers continues to influence discussions on feminism and gender equality.

I'm sure it goes without saying, but I'm still going to emphasize it, women's experiences differed depending on race, ethnicity, geography, economic and social status. So, while I'm bringing some experiences and statistics to light, it doesn't encompass everyone.

I hope all of this information has really helped paint a picture as to what was going on from the mid to late 1800's in the United States.

Before we continue our episode, I just want to take a moment to let you know we are on Patreon! You can find us at patreon.com/worldherstory. It's a cool way for us to share more content in various forms and connect with you - our listeners! We'd love to see you there. [Patreon.com/worldherstory](https://patreon.com/worldherstory).

The formation of Seattle is an ongoing culmination of a lot of things - Oregon Trail explorers who headed a little more north, lumberers finding lush forests to tear down, businessmen in search of fur on the new frontier, a clean slate and fresh start for others...the west offered something new and different.

The formation of Seattle started in the 1850's when Arthur Denny led a party of 10 adults and 12 children across the Oregon Trail and traveled north beyond Portland, Oregon. He was encouraged to come "at once" from a previous party that was already scouting the area.

The city is named after a Duwamish leader Sealth and by 1853, it was officially being advertised by new businesses that were forming. There was the steam-powered saw mill and the lumber industry, fur trade, the need for housing development, etc.

It is important to note - this area was already occupied by local Indigenous Suquamish and Duwamish tribes.

The mill sent most of its production to the booming city of San Francisco, and made a killing. It became the modern economic foundation for the city of Seattle, and started to put it on the map as a place of interest for other business owners and explorers.

In the 1870's, the Northern Pacific Railway Company announced a terminal in Tacoma, which is about 40 miles south of Seattle. While this news was disappointing at the time, leaders of the soon-to-be great city formed a connection, and by the late 1880's, population and business was booming.

Lumber and coal were the main industries, but fishing, wholesale goods, and shipbuilding added to the expansion and economic growth of the city. At one point, there were 1,000 people per month moving to Seattle, with 500 buildings under construction. Everything was made of wood.

The Sons of Profit, the economic and unofficial leaders of Seattle, had about three decades of growth under their belts when Madam Lou Graham entered the picture.

Madam Lou Graham was a German immigrant who found her way to Missouri when she was about 20 years old. From there, she sought out adventure and new beginnings and continued to travel to the northwest. Based on the arrival of her time frame in the late 1880's, after the completion of the Tacoma terminal, it's fair to say she probably arrived via train and did not endure the Oregon Trail.

She was born Dorthea Georgine Emile Ohben in either the late 1850's or early 1860's. She was a prostitute by trade, and a fiery business woman with a keen sense for opportunity.

The first real record of Madam Lou is in 1887 when she was charged with keeping a house of prostitution in Seattle.

But prostitution was a booming underground business in Seattle - a town full of men with new money to spend and no wives around? Sex workers and altruistic women were voluntarily

making their way to the Northwest to take advantage of this. Brothels were opening up left, right, and center.

But Madam Lou decides to bring her business to the forefront, she goes directly to the leaders of Seattle, who were also the bankers and investors and businessmen of Seattle and offers a proposition.

She proposed a brothel that was comparable to the finest hotels in the city. The rates wouldn't change, and would be posted. Men were charged \$2 for their visit or \$5 to spend the night. Which equates to \$65 per romp, or \$167 a night.

She continued that her ladies would be gorgeous, talented, clean and healthy, and who could "discuss the opera, politics, or economics or world conditions on an intelligent level with the leaders of America."

She offered a money-back guarantee. If any visitor to her establishment needed to see a physician because of their time spent there, she would pay the fee.

Her idea also included that the first floor was reserved for civil drinking and some companionship. The upper floors were meant for various types of physical therapy.

She sold her idea that she was once an apprentice in prostitution, and now a master in her craft was able to provide the finest women of the night.

The condition Lou met is that she had to contribute monetarily to the city. And as it turns out, she ended up contributing more to the common schools of King County than any other person. In fact, because of her contributions so early on, it's why King County was able to have such a well-established education system in place.

If a woman of Madam Lou's was put on the books for prostitution, they were charged as "seamstresses" and let go.

Her brothel became such an institution, there were more business transactions made in her parlor than at city hall.

William Speidel wrote, "No young businessman was really considered a man about town until he could discuss with ease the interior decorations...and some of the finer points of the distinguished young ladies."

Madam Lou paid \$3,000 for her initial plot of land and building. Which is about \$100,000 today.

In 1889, there was a massive fire in Seattle. It burnt over 116 acres, and everything easily caught fire because it was all made from lumber. Fortunately, no one died and it killed an estimated one million rats, but also caused millions of dollars of damage.

Madam Lou's business prior to the fire helped her prosper after it. She was able to afford paying \$25,000 for a new, bigger plot of land and building - which is about \$825,000 today. Also, her new building was made of stone. Because she was able to create such a well renowned establishment, she prospered after the fire because other brothels were down for the count.

Other local madams did try to make it work by moving from house to house, or utilizing the makeshift cribs that were created to help address the homelessness, but it caused a lot of issues. Men were beaten and robbed in random alleyways as they were trying to find these random locations to get a lady of the night. It created such a controversy, policemen were stationed around the cribs and no one unauthorized could enter the small neighborhoods, hitting the prostitution business rather harshly - with the exception of Madam Lou.

In the Panic of 1893, with a massive recession, all of these leaders and bankers and investors were on the brink of bankruptcy, and Madam Lou loaned them all money and saved them. In fact, Madam Lou loaned out more money than the bank, and had a second form of income through the interest she generated from repayments.

Madam Lou was definitely a local celebrity. She dressed well, and was quite the philanthropist. She was always in the local paper for some reason or another, along with her staff.

Lou cared for children whose parents were known alcoholics or who'd lost their money in the Klondike Gold Rush. She paid the legal fees of a woman who killed her abusive boyfriend in self-defense. She was an advocate for the underdog and understanding of those who were not at fault for their misfortune in life.

The ladies who worked for her could expect higher-than-average wages than those of personal maids or working in a textile factory. Although they were known as the 'ladies from Hades', they rode around in carriages or walked around town in their best clothes and jewelry because they could afford to always look nice.

She was an equal opportunity employer. She employed Indigenous women, and employed a man she referred to as “Chong” who was a longtime employee that handled her business affairs. At a time when Indigenous people and Chinese people were treated so poorly, and illegal to employ, Madam Lou soldiered on with what she felt she needed to do.

She is also known to have employed trans women and was in a relationship with a woman who posed as her housekeeper, and even adopted her partner’s daughter.

After understanding the powerful influence German culture had on Americans, it should be no surprise that a German-born immigrant was a progressive and decent employer. She educated her staff, provided them with healthcare, and employed whomever she wanted, regardless of sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, legal status, etc. She made the business decisions that she needed to, to be successful. And she did it with care and inclusivity.

She more than likely faced ill-treatment when she was a prostitute, and learned from those experiences whether good or bad. She utilized her skill sets to create a healthy and loyal working environment, and an even more loyal clientele.

Hanna Brooks Olsen writes, “Graham was the closest thing this frontier had to a reality TV star. Local papers spared no detail in chronicling her fashion and baubles.”

Although there is much to say about Madam Lou Graham’s influence in Seattle during the late 1800’s, she met her match with Judge Thomas Humes who outlawed brothels wholly, something which Madam Lou managed to avoid for years before this.

In 1903, Madam Lou was completely powerless and headed to San Francisco, where she died quite suddenly in a German hospital.

William Speidel wrote that she died of Syphilis, but Hanna Brooks Olsen recently went through medical records, and found something different. Madam Lou died of quite a sudden pain, perhaps stomach ulcer or cancer related, but something that is not in line with that of a Syphilis-ridden death.

Because Madam Lou never finished the process to become a US Citizen, her estate hung in limbo for nearly a decade. Siblings in Germany fought for pieces of her estate, with properties ranging from Bellingham to Tacoma Washington. Although the lore is Madam Lou donated her land to the public school system that now sits on her property, in reality, King County claimed some of her property with the reasoning she shouldn’t have been able to purchase it in the first place because of her not being a citizen.

As we conclude this episode diving into the intriguing life of Madam Lou Graham, one of the unofficial founders of Seattle, we find ourselves at the intersection of history, feminism, and the ongoing struggles faced by sex workers today. Lou Graham's story is not just a chapter in the annals of the Pacific Northwest, but a testament to the complex narratives woven into the fabric of women's history.

Madam Lou Graham navigated the challenges of her time, establishing a prominent presence in the early days of Seattle's development. Her resilience, entrepreneurial spirit, and defiance of societal norms make her a compelling figure, challenging preconceived notions about women's roles in the 19th century.

However, as we reflect on her story, it's crucial to acknowledge the broader context of the era, marked by moralistic movements like the Social Purity Movement. Madam Lou Graham's experiences, while emblematic of certain aspects of women's agency, were also shaped by the prevailing attitudes towards sex work and the broader struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society.

In considering the impact on feminism and sex workers today, we recognize the ongoing challenges and debates surrounding the rights and dignity of those involved in the sex industry. The dichotomy of moralistic judgments and the need for empowerment and agency echoes across time, from Madam Lou Graham's era to the present day.

As we strive for a more inclusive and understanding society, it's essential to learn from history, appreciating the complexities and contradictions that shaped the lives of women like Madam Lou Graham. The resilience and resistance she embodied provided inspiration for modern feminists and advocates working towards a world where the rights and autonomy of all women, including sex workers, are respected and upheld.

Thank you for joining us today - I'm Tabitha Bear and this is World Herstory.