

5-17-2013

# Notable and Notorious Idaho Women: An Annotated Bibliography

Amy Vecchione  
*Boise State University*



This document was originally published by the Idaho Library Association in *The Idaho Librarian*. This work is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution License. Details regarding the use of this work can be found at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

## The Idaho Librarian

A PUBLICATION OF THE IDAHO LIBRARY ASSOCIATION (ISSN: 2151-7738)

# Notable and Notorious Idaho Women: An Annotated Bibliography

POSTED BY [EDITOR](#) · MAY 17, 2013 · [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

FILED UNDER [ARTICLES](#), [BIBLIOGRAPHY](#), [IDAHO HISTORY](#), [IDAHO WOMEN](#), [INMATES](#), [PENITENTIARY](#), [WOMEN](#)

Idaho Penitentiary Inmates 1864-1947 Catalog: Women

[http://www.history.idaho.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/inmates\\_women\\_1864-1947.pdf](http://www.history.idaho.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/inmates_women_1864-1947.pdf)

---

In the early days of Idaho's penitentiary there was a common belief that women could not be held responsible for murder. Juries were comprised of only men at this time, and it was generally thought that women didn't have the intellectual capability to be so plotting. Often women were not tried for first degree murder; they were characterized as crazy rather than manipulative. "Anecdotally, they [juries] didn't have it in their hearts to hang a woman," according to Amber Beierle, Site Manager of the Old Idaho Penitentiary. This is often reflected in the short amounts of time that they served for crimes such as murder and assault, but also reflected in the size of the women's ward at the Old Penitentiary. When the Penitentiary was built there was no space for women at all.

Few women were convicted of crimes from 1864-1947 as compared to the men convicted during the same period. Prior to 1906 the women were incarcerated in what is referred to as the 1890 Cell House inside the prison walls. After 1906 women stayed in the old warden's house with a wall surrounding. Eventually the old warden's house was destroyed and Idaho Department of Corrections built the dorm style building that is there now, known as the Women's Ward, which was completed in 1920.

The Idaho Penitentiary Inmates 1864-1947 Catalog: Women is an index of most of the women that were in the Old Idaho Penitentiary from 1864-1947. In my research I have investigated the stories of several women and have found all of these women to be captivating, each with a profound story that speaks to women's history. There are sad stories, like that of Josie Kensler who was pregnant when she entered the Pen, and who became pregnant while there as well. There are inspirational stories and revenge stories, too. Here are a few short examples.

Ida Laherty was a teen when served less than a year for stealing a team of horses. She stole the team of horses for her boyfriend. Presumably they were going to spend the rest of their lives together, but he ratted Ida out. Josie Kensler looked after Ida in the Pen. Ida was released into a private home within a year of her sentence after the Idaho Women's Temperance Movement wrote to request her pardon.

Henebe (no last name available) was incarcerated for murder but was able to escape! After her escape she made it back to her home in Fort Hall. She was later brought back to the Pen.

Alta McGee "you could look at her as a jilted woman" says Beierle, but she was perhaps Boise's first drive-by. Her husband started seeing another woman and together the new couple would drive by Alta's house after he moved in with this other woman. One day, Alta took a ride through town with a friend. After asking her friend to drive to some destination they drove by her husband's business whereupon she began shooting at her husband. No one was hurt, but Alta served some time.

Ella Mugerza wanted to escape her alcoholic, abusive husband but couldn't. During Prohibition he operated a pool hall which also illegally served alcohol. She reported that he came at her one day and after a struggle with the gun she accidentally shot him in the head. Though he lost a "coffee cup worth of brains," according to the doctor's testimony, he lived, and she served a brief jail stint.

Cora Dunn was quite flamboyant, and had a way with words. She wrote many letters to people outside the Pen which the warden did not send on. As a result, you can read her letters in her inmate file. One letter, to an ex-lover who helped with her conviction, explains how she got crabs from him. She was incarcerated for writing checks falsely with her family's estate, or formerly obtaining money under false pretenses.

I could write volumes about these notorious women, the struggles that they faced, the inequities that they experienced, which landed them in the Pen, but until those are written, you may peruse the Idaho Penitentiary Inmates 1864-1947 Catalog: Women, request to view any of these files at the Idaho State Archives, and formulate your own opinion of the nature of these crimes.

### Who's Who of Idaho Women of the Past by Betty Penson-Ward

This short volume is an alphabetical by last name resource about various Idaho women who were notable for one reason or another. Some highlights include Margaret Cobb Ailshie who was the publisher of the Idaho Statesman for 31 years, Emma Green who designed the Idaho State Seal, and Eveline Steunenberg, the widow of assassinated governor Frank Steunenberg, who rehabilitated her husband's assassin, Harry Orchard.

### Idaho women in history: big and little biographies and other gender stories by Betty Penson-Ward

This book provides more in depth, encyclopedia, and sometimes anecdotal information about the history of women in Idaho. Beginning with Native American women, continuing to women's roles in homestead life, and with a lot of information on Idaho's women's movements, this is an extremely valuable title on this topic. The chapter on Women's Movements reminds us that Idaho was one of the first of four states to give women the right to vote (1896) and points out that, "a hundred years later our state does not yet rate among the highest in several areas of women's concerns: one fourth of all first-

time Idaho mothers in 1989 were in their teens...the predominantly male Idaho legislature in 1990 voted for what was then the most restrictive abortion law in the nation, which was vetoed at the last minute by Gov. Cecil Andrus." Penson-Ward's perspective is educational, enlightening and a terrific must-read for anyone in Idaho.

### Biographies of Idaho Women Compiled by The Altrusa Club of Boise 1979

This hand typed collection of "abbreviated biographies of Idaho women" showcases some lesser known notable Idaho women. In many ways these anecdotal vignettes without any citations perfectly encapsulate Idaho's treasure trove of history. Every story is captivating, and holds some kind of special twist. Perhaps the most interesting of the stories is about a cross dresser bronc rider named Joe Monaghan who was only discovered to be a woman upon his death. These short stories are listed in alphabetical order by last name of the woman, and some have an identified author, some do not. This work was compiled by the Altrusa Club of Boise in 1979. Without a subject index it is difficult to use this as a research tool, but the stories are incredible and each woman identified within these pages could have much more written about her. The Altrusa Club operated in Boise from 1950-2002. Their manuscript collection is located at the Idaho State Historical Society.

### A Danish photographer of Idaho Indians: Benedicte Wrensted by Joanna Cohan Scherer

This gorgeous book publishes the work of an obscure Danish woman photographer named Benedicte Wrensted who documented the Northern Shoshone, Lemhi, and Bannock tribes in Idaho between 1895-1912. Wrensted operated a photography studio out of Pocatello, Idaho and took many formal photographs of local and regional individuals. Wrensted photographed one Native American family quite often: The Edmos, a prominent family from the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. This significant work depicts the life and culture of Native Americans from that time period, and also the work of a female photographer and business woman.

### Lady Bluebeard: the true story of love and marriage, death and flypaper by William C. Anderson

Based on a true story this is a fictional account of Idaho's most notorious female serial killer. By removing arsenic from flypaper Lyda Southard killed four husbands and one brother in law before getting caught. Though this story is based on a true story the account has taken "dramatic license" as the author describes it to tell the tale of Lyda, otherwise known as Lady Bluebeard.

### Polly Bemis: Lalu Nathoy & Polly Bemis, a Chinese American pioneer by Priscilla Wegars

Priscilla Wegars has researched Polly Bemis a great deal and produced a terrific children's biography about this Idaho pioneer. Born into slavery, and eventually was won in a poker game by an Idaho miner and businessman, Charlie Bemis, Polly worked with Charlie as a business partner, eventually marrying him when she was 40. Previously an audiobook was made about her life and was produced on vinyl LP. This short, seven-inch record can be found at the Idaho State Archives and the Library of Congress. The short book by Priscilla Wegars can be found in many more places.

Amy Vecchione, Digital Access Librarian/Assistant Professor, Albertsons Library, Boise State University.