

The Gold Rush: A New Wave of Feminism in Alaska

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Overview

Pictured below is a woman named Julia Musgrave. She traveled to Alaska during the 1898 Gold Rush with her husband, George Musgrave in search of gold and fortune. Throughout her years in Alaska, Julia sent a number of letters to her family residing in Plainfield, New Jersey. Most of these letters depict everyday life in Dawson, Yukon Territory, where the couple temporarily called home.

In some of her letters to her sister, Julia discusses her view on society's expected role of women. Her attitude towards women shifts as she adapts to the life and customs of the North. She transitions from expressing feelings of fear of being a woman in Alaska, to asserting herself as a self-sufficient and independent individual.

Julia's change in attitude towards herself and other women is exemplary of a feminist movement taking place during this time. Around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, women traveling North in search of new opportunities were not only discovering the riches of the land, but they were also beginning to recognize their own value and strengths as women.

Following this transition towards self-sufficiency was a change in how women used language. Traditionally, women of this time period used language delicately; however, during the Gold Rush, these women gained experiences that allowed them to pave their own way for linguistic change within the English language.

This analysis aims to highlight the impact of women in the Alaska Gold Rush and showcase their contributions to English in Alaska. By looking at these contributions through both a historical and linguistic lens, we can see how these women created their own feminist history.

The Life of Julia Musgrave

Julia Musgrave traveled from Plainfield, New Jersey to Dawson, Yukon Territory in 1898 with her husband, George Musgrave. She faced many hardships throughout her time spent in the Klondike, and she often discusses them in detail in her letters to her sister. At the beginning of her time in Dawson, Julia expresses her feelings of loneliness and confesses her longing to return home. In one letter, written on July 14, 1898, Julia writes of an opportunity to return home before the dreaded winter season; however, she decides to stay because she fears being away from George.

Months go by slowly for Julia as she continues to send letters to her family in New Jersey. As she becomes more accustomed to the lifestyle of the Klondike, however, the language she uses to talk about men and women drastically shifts. On October 3, 1901 Julia writes a letter to her sister explaining that the wisest of women stay single, as "[t]he best of men don't treat their wives as they ought" and "[a] girl loses her individuality when she marries" (Musgrave, 23). This marks a new feminist mindset that Julia adopts while living in the Klondike.

Women in the Gold Rush

- The Alaska Gold Rush took place from about 1896 to 1899.
- Between 1896-1900, over a thousand women trekked through Klondike territory. (*Extraordinary Women*)
- Many women traveled alone to the northern regions of Canada and Alaska, while others came along with their husbands and families. These women came from varying socioeconomic backgrounds; some were in search of adventure, some were in desperate need of work, and some came to escape their old lives. (Bornstein, 13)
- There is a false stereotype about Klondike women, being that they all came to Alaska to work as dance hall entertainers and sex workers. The truth is that many women were pushed into the sex industry as a result of being outnumbered by men, the ratio sometimes being ten to one in a camp. (Morgan, 1)
- Women of the Gold Rush were not just involved in the entertainment industry, however. Many of them worked as cooks, cleaners, teachers, businesswomen, hotel owners, and miners. (*National Park Service*)
- Social class was regarded as highly important during this time; women who had belonged to the middle class in the states were elevated to a higher status in the Klondike with less rigid gender expectations, thus encouraging a new sense of female identity visible through language. (Bornstein, 20)
- Kollin's notion of a "New Empire" translates into the movement of the "New Woman" that followed the onset of the Alaska Gold Rush. This idea highlights the United States' hungry desire for socioeconomic reform, and more specifically, a re-wiring of middle-class femininity. According to Kollin, the rearrangement of social expectations that stemmed through the newfound opportunities of wealth and power in the Klondike "produced a 'revised version' of female identity that enabled middle-class women to assert themselves as public citizens whose new domain of authority expanded beyond the traditional domestic realm." (Kollin, 108)

July 14, 1898:

"I ought not to spend another winter in here, and a Mr. Shepard is leaving here on the 1st of August. George wishes me to go home with him, as he lives in New York City. I think I ought to stay with my husband for it is so hard for a man to cook for himself in this country + as I have no home on the outside I fear I would be discontented + lonesome as I could not hear from George. I think I shall trust the Lord + stay with him this winter..." (Musgrave, 7)



Pictured: Julia Musgrave
George and Julia Musgrave papers, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

October 3, 1901:

"I have never yet met a man that comes up to my idea of a husband as the world is today. I think a lady is much wiser that lives single. The best of men do not treat their wives as they ought, they become so engaged in business that they have no time to devote to their wives while living and some forget theirs when dead. A girl loses her individuality when she marries..." (Musgrave, 23)

How Does This Affect English?

- This artifact takes into account the social change that women were experiencing during the Gold Rush through a linguistic lens.
- In this era we see women start to incorporate more masculine speech, such as cursing, steering away from the stereotypical feminine guidelines of language. (Bornstein, 51)
- In Julia's letters we witness a transition from a woman consumed by fear of the unknown to a woman whose thoughts and opinions are strongly backed up by life experiences.
- Particularly we see this change in the way she discusses individuality. In the first letter, she sacrifices her happiness and comfort to attend to her husband's needs; in the second letter, her attitude shifts towards a more self-centered, feminist mindset as she discards former Victorian notions of marriage and dependence.
- This is important because it marks a period in time in which women could assert their dominance over men on a more equal playing field.
- Specifically, we observe more "I" statements describing actions and goals instead of feelings.
- In the letters, the tone surrounding other women (gossip), as well as Julia herself, shifts from negative to positive, as seen in the second letter: "A girl loses her individuality when she marries," suggesting that women possess individuality until it is taken by men.
- Julia's ideology and values change, as her emphasis on her "faith in God" shifts to a more concrete and human belief in herself. As her letters progress we begin to see less language about God, indicating social change.
- The letters maintain some traditional aspects of femininity, but Julia's writing patterns develop into clear statements rather than passive questions.
- Comparing the two letters, we see more words like "think" and "ought" in the first letter than in the second, which indicate hesitancy.
- Julia becomes more comfortable expressing her opinions on objective issues as time goes on.

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