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Keeping House on the Comstock: Irish Immigrant Women in Nevada, 1850-1880

Christina M. Thompson

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, christinamthompson@live.com

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Figure 1. St. Mary in the Mountains Catholic Church, Virginia City (Courtesy of the Library of Congress digital collection.)

Keeping House on the Comstock:

Irish Immigrant Women in Nevada, 1850-1880

Christina Thompson

christinamthompson@live.com; thomp750@unlv.nevada.edu

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Introduction

“There can be no doubt but that a good wife is a great blessing, and it is also true that all wives desire to be good. ...The influence of a good wife is immense. – The power of a wife for good or evil is irresistible [*sic*]. ...No condition is hopeless when the wife possesses firmness, decision, and economy.”¹ This article, published in a New York City Irish American newspaper in 1850, describes the role of a “good wife” and what she means to Irish families. Although she was many things, the Irish woman was first and foremost a wife and a mother; she took her responsibility very seriously, and though men may have thought themselves superior in the public domain during the nineteenth century, Irish men knew their wives ruled at home.

There have been many studies of Irish immigrants to the United States during the nineteenth century, however, there has been limited research conducted in relation to Irish women as a distinct group. There has been even less published about Irish immigrant women in Nevada during this time period, which makes any research into the topic both interesting and challenging.² The lack of secondary source material may be due, at least in part, to the limited availability of primary source material on women in general, and Irish women specifically, because they were not often written about in local newspapers, and were not generally featured in business or other directories. Even in 1863, this was recognized as a problem by some of the more prominent women living in and around Virginia City, as Miss Minerva Morris writes to the *Gold Hill Daily News*, “It is a singularly remarkable fact, that the public journals of the Territory have had so little to say...of women... . . .I for one am

¹ “The good wife,” *Irish-American*, April 14, 1850.

²James, Ronald M., “Erin’s Daughters on the Comstock”, *Comstock Women: The Making of a Mining Community*, ed. Ronald M. James and C. Elizabeth Raymond, (Reno: University of Nevada, Reno Press, 1951), 246.

resolved to urge you to transcend the usual gallantry of our newspapers which never allude to the ladies.”³ A study of women in the press in such mining towns as Virginia City was conducted in 1993, which further speaks of the subtle nature of women in the public sphere.⁴ Nonetheless, there are several books and articles published about the American West which can begin to shape the general picture of what life was like for Irish immigrant women in Nevada during the nineteenth century. Some of the more recent titles in this field include Ronald M. James’s *The Roar and the Silence*, published in 1998, which details life in Virginia City during the Comstock Lode. An article entitled *Women of the Mining West* written by James and published in 1993 explicitly talks about women in Virginia City; and another article published by Barbara Cloud, *Images of Women in the Mining-Camp Press*, details how women were covered in the press of the mining towns surrounding Virginia City. The most significant work published that discusses Irish women in Nevada specifically is *Comstock Women: The Making of a Mining Community*, which is a volume of essays discussing various aspects of life for women of different ethnic groups on the Comstock Lode. Within this collection, there is a chapter on Irish women entitled “Erin’s Daughters on the Comstock,” which provides enough detailed information to create a wonderful starting point for any research project on the topic. Finally, a major primary source contribution to the field was the editing and publication of the *Journals of Alfred Doten* by Walter van Tilburg. Alfred Doten was a journalist that lived and worked in and around Virginia City that kept diaries of the events, both public and private, that were not always published in the local newspapers but contain valuable information for obtaining a picture of life in these cities.

³ Miss Minerva Morris, *Gold Hill Daily News*, October 13, 1863.

⁴ Barbara Cloud, “Images of Women in the Mining-Camp Press,” *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 204-205.

This study attempts to briefly describe and analyze the lives of Irish immigrant women living in Virginia City, Nevada and the surrounding areas (Gold Hill, Nevada and Carson City, Nevada) in comparison with the lives of Irish immigrant women living in New York, New York and Boston, Massachusetts during the same period. This essay will provide evidence from primary and secondary sources that Irish women in Nevada developed a level of financial independence from men, and re-created structures of community and family that already existed on the east coast of the United States. Throughout the course of this study, there were many questions asked, but not all of them were able to be answered due to the limited availability of materials. Some of these questions were: How many Irish women lived in Virginia City and the surrounding towns during the period of 1850-1880? What were their ages, marital status, occupation, and living conditions? What community groups existed, if any, for women in Virginia City and the surrounding towns? What role in the development of the Irish community did these women play, and what role in the community at large? Despite the limitations on the topic of Irish immigrant women mentioned above, there were several resources available through the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) that were utilized to answer the questions asked. These materials included newspaper microforms from UNLV's Lied Library as well as ones on loan from various university libraries in New York, Maine, and Boston, and primary and secondary source books available in the Special Collections section of the UNLV Lied Library. The two most noteworthy works that influenced and directed this study were Ronald M. James and his contribution on Irish immigrant women to *Comstock Women* as well as Hasia R. Diner's book *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, which is one of the foundational works to the topic of Irish immigrant women in the United States. The scope of

this study is also restricted by the lack of access to primary source archive materials existing only in Reno, Carson City, and Virginia City, Nevada, which would have increased the information presented on women's groups, the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, and the daily lives of Irish women in Nevada.

The structure of this paper is thematic, with each section outlining and comparing the lives of Irish women living and working in Nevada (primarily Virginia City) with the lives of Irish women living and working on the east coast of the United States (primarily New York and Boston). The first section details the background of the study, including the main reasons Irish women chose to migrate to the United States, their experiences traveling to the United States and the beginnings of their lives as immigrants in the New World. The second section delves deeper into the lives of Irish women by exploring their experiences working primarily as domestic servants in New York and Boston as well as reasons they may have wanted to move out West; this is then compared to the lives of women who began to build a community structure in Nevada. The third section discusses the family structures that Irish women experienced throughout the stages of their lives in Ireland, New York and Boston, and in Nevada. The fourth section analyzes the changing economic and political roles that Irish women experienced, as well as the factors that led to these changing roles. The fifth section outlines the social lives of Irish women in comparison to men in both New York and Boston, and in Nevada. Finally, the conclusion will review the influence of Irish women on the second generation of women that grew up in Nevada to become an important part of the development of the state.

From Ireland to America

The Great Famine period in Ireland is generally said to have lasted from 1845 until 1855, but its social and cultural effects lasted for a much longer time frame, particularly the changes faced by women. Beginning in 1830, these changes included fewer marriages, a lower social status in relation to their marriages, as well as their individual sources for income starting to dissipate.⁵ Additionally, the growing influence of the Catholic Church caused restrictions on the public lives of women which isolated them from other women as well as men while hindering their ability to get married at a young age.⁶ Women had a difficult time finding employment in rural Ireland especially after the Famine became widespread. With limited options available to them, many moved to larger cities to find work in the emerging industrial factories, as domestic servants in wealthy homes, or in “home industries,” which also played a role in delaying the age at which they would seek to get married and start a family.⁷ Once married, women still had a prominent and important role in the family structure due to the contributions they were able to make through household work, economic activities, and the birth of many children in the pre-Famine era. After economic contributions to the family unit decreased during and after the Famine, their status within the family began to decrease as well. Arranged marriages began to increase, along with the use of dowries to solidify marriage proposals which were often arranged by men on behalf of women, causing the devaluation of women in general.⁸ One positive social effect on women was the emergence of a national primary school system in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century, with the nationalization of secondary school following in the 1870’s. This significant change resulted in increased rates of literacy among women as well as an increase in

⁵ Nolan, Janet. *Ourselves Alone, Women’s Emigration from Ireland 1885-1920* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 26.

⁶ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 26-27.

⁷ Lynch-Brennan, Margaret. *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 27.

⁸ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 32-33.

the amount of the general population that could speak English with some fluency (as opposed to only speaking Irish).⁹ These factors in the lives of Irish women will be discussed in more detail later, in section three regarding their family life and structure.

Later, after 1850, significant numbers of women chose to emigrate to the United States (or other countries) for the prospect of a greater economic and social opportunity that they could no longer obtain in Ireland. Despite the fact that this pattern of migration to the United States was not something new, it has been shown that the greatest numbers of immigrants moved during and after the Famine, which some estimate to be as high as three million or more.¹⁰ During the worst years of the famine (1847-1854), approximately one and a quarter million immigrants moved to the United States.¹¹ Young, single women made up a large part of this group as Hasia R. Diner points out: over 66 percent of these immigrants were between 15 and 35 (1850-1887), the median age for women immigrants from 1852-1921 was 21.2, and only sixteen percent of all immigrants coming to the United States were actually married.¹² The process of making the long journey was not easy, especially on the lower middle class, working class, and poor that decided to take the chance; the costs of such a trip were high, both financially and physically. Some women were able to obtain help to finance their journey to the New World through a few different methods: relatives already living in the United States sent money which occasionally went towards the migration of their families instead of other areas, tenants petitioned for the funds (in whole or in part) from their landlords, and women that worked in some garment factories were able to receive fully covered travelling expenses and even new

⁹ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 38.

¹⁰ Lynch-Brennan, 40-41.

¹¹ Diner, Hasia R., *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 31.

¹² Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 32-33.

clothing.¹³ Prior to leaving for America, the families of young Irish women held a type of “wake” for them, as it was generally acknowledged that they would likely never see their loved ones in person again.¹⁴ While the financial assistance helped to fund the immigration to the United States, it did not help to improve the conditions aboard the ships that transported passengers. Sometimes called “coffin ships” due to the high numbers of deaths, these ships were often converted freighters that transported passengers in unsanitary and unsafe conditions that aided in the spread of disease, while being manned by a captain and crew that were cruel and unpleasant to passengers.¹⁵ Upon arrival in America, if Irish women were able to survive, they were often able to find jobs as domestic servants almost right away due to the high demands of wealthy and middle class American women that wanted the prestige that the presence of a hired domestic servant provided them and also with the assistance of friends or family already living in America.¹⁶ Ultimately, Irish immigrant women to the United States sought the multiple and varied opportunities, both socially and economically, available to them in the New World that had slowly disappeared in Ireland.

Irish Women in American Cities

One of the most significant changes that several Irish immigrant women had to deal with when moving to the United States was the switch from a primarily rural life to one living in a large and bustling city. Part of the reason that many Irish stayed in large cities, despite any culture shock they may have experienced, is because “in the cities the Irish could create communities where links of kinship and bonds of friendship could be reconstituted to ease the

¹³ Money, Lynch-Brennan, 41; Clothing, McMahon, Cian. “The Coffin Ship: Irish Migration, Mortality, and Memory.” (Paper presented to History Department of University of Nevada, Las Vegas, October 23, 2013.)

¹⁴ Lynch-Brennan, 51.

¹⁵ McMahon, “The Coffin Ship”.

¹⁶ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 61.

shock of migration and cultural change.”¹⁷ The networks of friendship and community that the Irish built helped to sustain them through periods of poverty and the loneliness felt by the lack of immediate family members surrounding them as had been the case in Ireland. There were even some informal immigrant groups in place for new arrivals to attempt to make them feel more at home in their new country.¹⁸ In New York, an article appeared in the *Irish American*, a newspaper published by an Irish immigrant for the Irish community, regarding the need for more organization in this respect to aid immigrants as they arrived in New York for the first time:

A Society has been formed by some of the leading Germans in this city for the purpose of aiding and assisting those of their countrymen who may stand in need on their arrival here...This is precisely such a society as we have been asking for and shall (D. V.) continue to ask for till our object shall have been obtained. ...The mode of transacting business in our cities is so different, the accent and idioms of Americans sound so strangely to the ears of foreigners newly arrived, transatlantic habits and customs are so dissimilar to those in the old world. ...A properly organised [*sic*] and conducted Irish Emigrant Association could ...confer on the immigrant and society at large incalculable blessings.¹⁹

As you may notice, the main concern of this immigrant society is directed towards the successes of men; however, the intent is generally the same, which is to aid the newly arrived immigrants through information and potentially financial assistance. Some emigrant societies even threw charity balls to raise money and help with their cause, such as the one held in January 1850 at “Niblo’s splendid new saloon” which the “most respectable citizens of Irish birth, with their families” attended.²⁰ These balls, along with the societies, were generally run by prominent men in the Irish community, with their wives assisting as secretaries in the background.²¹ Despite the fact that men primarily ran these societies, they were also useful tools for women to utilize if they did not already have a pre-existing family structure present in America.

¹⁷ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America*, 40.

¹⁸ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America*, 40-41.

¹⁹ “Emigrant Societies,” *Irish-American*, November 4, 1849.

²⁰ “Emigrant Ball,” *Irish-American*, January 13, 1850.

²¹ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America*, 122.

In addition, Irish women developed friendships and maintained a written dialogue with their families back home, even corresponding with their new friends who had moved to another city to maintain a long term connection. Many stories and events from the daily life of an Irish woman were included in these letters: requests for photographs of family members, gossip that was heard from their local friends, complaints about their employer, money for their families back in Ireland, and many more topics.²² Some women, particularly in the domestic servant profession, would develop large networks of letter exchanges between other women with similar jobs, as did the Irish immigrant Nora McCarthy who maintained correspondence with multiple domestic servants living all over the east coast of the United States. Nora and her friends even became quite affectionate with one another in their letters due to the length of time and frequency of contact they were able to make this way.²³ Overall, this structure helped many women to cope with their new lives and new professions in America and aided them in re-creating a sense of home and community in cities, such as New York and Boston, which they were living in.

The Catholic Church was another critical community structure that was in place for Irish women living in large cities on the east coast of the United States. According to Janet Nolan, one of the most significant ways that Irish women showed the value they placed on the church was through monetary contributions, which often helped to finance the further expansion of the church into Irish neighborhoods that did not previously have one. Through the societal connections made through the church, women were able to found benevolent societies, temperance unions, and organize charitable events such as fairs and balls to benefit the Church

²² Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 121-125.

²³ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 122-126.

and the Irish community.²⁴ Margaret Lynch-Brennan echoes this argument in her book *The Irish Bridget*, when she states that the church served as a primary communication network for servants and other Irish women so they could maintain close ties with the Irish community at large along with continuing important spiritual activities. The charity fairs, specifically, were a major social event organized by the “ladies” of the church community that served the dual purpose of raising money for their parish and creating and strengthening women’s relationships with others in their community as a whole.²⁵ As we will see later, the charity fairs and other church related activities were an important element in the social lives of Irish women in Nevada as well.

Despite the strength and depth of the Irish community already in existence, there was some pull for Irish families to move out West. The discoveries of gold in California and the Comstock Mining Lode in Nevada created opportunities for Irish families tired of crowded city life to move west and build a community from scratch. Some Irish newspapers were even encouraging men to move their families away from the city, such as the article published in *The Pilot* from Boston: “The East has neither room nor resources for them; but the West has room and resources for millions on millions,” and it continued later to say that out West “the habits of life will be wholesome and healthy; a man will not be bringing up his children to a life of degradation, dirt and infamy; but in industrious ways.”²⁶ The prospect of escaping poverty and the crowded living conditions of large eastern cities like New York and Boston was too much for some Irish. Initially, men began moving to Nevada by themselves to earn money and participate in the Comstock Lode mining boom before bringing their wives and children along behind them. In total, there were 2,857 men and 159 women living in Virginia City (Storey County) during the

²⁴ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 87-88.

²⁵ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 140.

²⁶ “Information for Emigrants,” *The Pilot*, March 16, 1850.

1860 United States census, and of these, only twelve women and 310 men were Irish, which means that at this time the Irish population in Nevada was a small percentage of the population as a whole, and thus had little community structure to draw upon in their new home.²⁷ In fact, there were only 651 Irish living in the entire Nevada territory during the 1860 census, with approximately half of the total Irish population of the territory living in Storey County (specifically, Virginia City), these pioneers would have to begin the process of building some type of community network for those moving out west after them.²⁸

The presence of more women in the Virginia City community at large was extremely important because of the high moral authority that was given to them within the social and family structures left over from their lives in New York and Boston.²⁹ Many of the first waves of single or widowed women that came to Nevada started their lives by opening and running lodging houses for the male miners and laborers who came to Virginia City. These women used their domestic skills (likely developed through experiences as domestic servants) to serve as surrogate mothers and wives for these men: they cleaned their clothes, provided them with a warm bed to sleep in, fed them, and sometimes kept them company during quiet times.³⁰ Men's wives and children also began joining them once funds were available for their journey and the building of a house for the family to live in. Almost overnight, the Irish community and its

²⁷ Total, James, "Erin's Daughters on the Comstock," 304; Irish, State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1860 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

²⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Statistics on Foreign Born", 1860 census, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>. The census records list this area as being in "Nevada Territory," despite the fact that the Nevada Territory was not officially formed until 1861 and was under the jurisdiction of Utah Territory during the time of the 1860 census.

²⁹ The importance of women in their primary roles as wives and mothers can be seen peeking through in articles published in the Irish newspapers from these cities. For examples, see "My Mother," *Irish-American*, August 12, 1849; "Female Character," *Irish-American*, November 4, 1849; "Women's Influence," *The Pilot*, March 23, 1850; and "Mothers & Sisters," and "Old Maids," *Irish-American*, February 24, 1850.

³⁰ Julie Nicoletta, *A Quiet Contribution: Women on the Comstock*, Videocassette, Directed by Curt Daniels (Reno: Channel 5 Public Broadcasting, 1998).

resources seemed to explode: the St. Mary in the Mountains Catholic Church was built in 1860 (made of wood, the structure was later reconstructed with bricks in 1868 after being blown down by heavy winds and again in 1876 after being destroyed in the Great Fire of 1875).³¹ The influential Father Patrick Manogue arrived a few years later, and the Catholic group Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (also known as the Sisters of Charity in some records) arrived in 1864 to establish a school, orphan asylum, and hospital.³² By the 1861 territorial census, the Storey County total population had grown by over 1,000, and by the 1870 United States census the total population was now 11,319 with 2,160 of these being Irish (born in Ireland).³³ Within the total Irish population, there were 735 women or 34 percent, and these women represented 21 percent of the total female population in Virginia City.³⁴ The building blocks were now in place for the Irish women of Virginia City to begin building the strong social networks they had left behind on the east coast.

Family Life and Structure

One of the most important structures that women could help to establish and expand in Nevada is the family institution that they are primarily responsible for maintaining. This was especially important for Irish immigrant women in America because of the lower social and familial status that they had developed during the Famine and post-Famine years.³⁵ As it was touched on earlier, women's status during and after the Famine declined partially due to the limited resources available now to Irish families and the resulting social changes that restricted their economic contributions to the family unit, as well as the increasing influence of the

³¹ James and Raymond, *Comstock Women*, 246-247.

³² Carolyn Beaupre, *A Quiet Contribution*.

³³ James, "Erin's Daughters on the Comstock," 304.

³⁴ State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1870 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

³⁵ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 16.

Catholic Church during the mid- to late nineteenth century that encouraged the patriarchal organization of a family.³⁶ Due to the economic constraints placed on men and women, arranged marriages accompanied by dowries became the norm. As stated earlier, women still maintained control over some aspects of their family, which included the household finances once married, how their children were raised, and some skills they would have obtained through their previous work experience outside of the home. As Diner points out, the strength and control women had over their lives was often joked about: “Folk proverbs underscored the lack of female passivity and lamented that ‘the three (things) most difficult to teach [are] a mule, a pig, and a woman’ whereas the ‘three things that leave the shortest traces [are] a bird on a branch, a ship on the sea, and a man on a woman.’”³⁷

The most significant change that Irish immigrant women in America experienced in relation to marriage was their increased ability to voluntarily marry at a later age and the freedom to choose their husband. The variety of work that was available to women in the United States helped to increase their social standing because of the financial contributions they were able to make, and this change, by extension, increased their authority within the family unit as well as the Irish American community at large.³⁸ Earlier, it was pointed out that the majority of female immigrants that came to the United States during the nineteenth century were single, and this is important because many of these women chose to work in fields such as domestic service until they were older, rather than marry at a young age. Diner and Lynch-Brennan both provide excellent statistics and primary source information on this particular topic. According to Diner, the average age for marriage of “young” Irish women in America was 31, and only 8 percent of

³⁶ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 34-35.

³⁷ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 16-17.

³⁸ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 46.

Irish women married between the ages of 20 to 29.³⁹ Lynch-Brennan's study of Irish domestic workers provides a more personal insight through her examinations of letters and newspapers. She states that Irish women generally remained working as domestic servants until the time came for them to marry, at which time they left their employment to take care of their household and raise children. Some domestic workers simply waited until they were fed up with the domestic life and decided to choose a husband as an "escape."⁴⁰ It was also an important aspect of the Irish community that Irish immigrants marry other Irish immigrants, especially Irish Catholic ones. It was so strongly encouraged, in fact, that those women who married outside of the Irish Catholic community faced some repercussions from this action through their families.⁴¹

Both Diner and Lynch-Brennan also briefly discuss the topic of domestic violence in Irish marriages, because it is a part of the Irish male stereotype that they are alcoholics and wife beaters and because it is an important factor in the lives of Irish women. According to Diner, Irish American marriages were troubled by "a high rate of domestic violence and discord, the frequent desertion of the male breadwinner, and a high rate of industrial accidents that created many a widow and orphan."⁴² Lynch-Brennan differs on this, stating instead that "the ranks of Irish men included loving husbands who got on well, and socialized, with their wives."⁴³ Both authors provide several primary source pieces of evidence to support their arguments, so it is difficult to draw definite conclusions based on these two differing arguments without reading the full primary documents directly. It would be interesting to re-examine this topic more in depth in

³⁹ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 47.

⁴⁰ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 142-144.

⁴¹ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 75.

⁴² Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 54-55.

⁴³ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 145.

the future, perhaps providing a thoroughly researched conclusion that would clear up whether Irish men did in fact abuse their wives in significant numbers.

The experiences of Irish immigrant women in Nevada differed from the experiences of those living on the east coast, mainly because the vast majority of them were already married by the time they moved out west. Some of the data that is presented for east coast cities does correlate to cities in Nevada, however; during the 1870 United States census, the average age of Irish women was 31 in Virginia City and 33 in Carson City. Additionally, the women listed in the census records as having the occupation of Domestic Servant were all listed as single and in their early to mid-twenties, while a majority of the married women were listed as Keeping House and in their late twenties to early thirties.⁴⁴ While these figures confirm that Irish women tended to marry later in life, they cannot tell us how long these women were married to their husbands, nor how their husbands treated them. A study needs to be undertaken to further evaluate and confirm the age when these women married and whether their husbands were domestic abusers, or if they were “loving husbands” as Lynch-Brennan portrays them.

Nonetheless, despite the lack of available data, some conclusions can be drawn from what information is available. It is clear from the census data that the majority of Irish women in Nevada were married; therefore, there would not have been a large single Irish community in places like Virginia City despite the size of the Irish population because there was no real need for one. One big event that might have been lost in the move was the tradition of Irish dances that aided single men and women in finding their future husbands and wives in major east coast cities like New York and Boston.⁴⁵ Because there was not a large single Irish population in

⁴⁴ State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1870 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

⁴⁵ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 146.

Nevada, these dances would not have been the large affairs they were on the east coast, and may not even have occurred at all. Another fact that we are able to determine from the available census data is that the vast majority of the Irish-born women in Nevada were also married to Irish-born men or men who had Irish-born parents, thus continuing the social tradition established on the east coast to marry within one's own ethnic and religious group.⁴⁶ There are a few exceptions, of course, such as Elena Elint, who lived in Virginia City in 1860 and was married to an Italian-born merchant, or Catharine Harvey, who lived in Carson City and was married to an English-born carpenter.⁴⁷ Overall, the experience of Irish women in Nevada was different primarily because they were already married upon arriving in the state and were raising their families instead of simply trying to earn a living as a single woman in a big city.

Children were an incredibly important part of an Irish woman's life once she was married, as taking care of and raising her children were her primary responsibility. Stemming from a move towards literacy in Ireland during the mid-nineteenth century, Irish mothers were very insistent that their children go to school and get an education. As Lynch-Brennan points out, the Irish in America saw the link between education and financial success, so they pushed their children to succeed in this way.⁴⁸ This push can be seen in the census records, as a large majority of children ages 6 to 17 born to Irish mothers in Nevada are listed as being in school instead of working.⁴⁹ The exceptions that can be found is 6 year old Kate Welch, who worked as a domestic servant in Virginia City in 1870 and 14 year old Mary Welch, who also worked as a

⁴⁶ James, "Erin's Daughters on the Comstock," 247.

⁴⁷ State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1860 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

⁴⁸ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 43.

⁴⁹ State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1860, 1870, and 1880 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

domestic servant in Carson City in 1870.⁵⁰ Orphans were an unfortunate aspect of Nevadan life, because of the occasional and unfortunate accidents in the Comstock mines, or outbreaks of diseases that might occur during this period. The Daughters of Charity ran an orphan asylum for these unlucky children, and often held Orphan's Fairs to raise money for them that other women in the community would volunteer for. It is likely that, because of their involvement in the Catholic community, Irish women in Nevada would have participated in these fairs.⁵¹ These fairs would have helped to pay for their general care and for providing the children with an education, which was the primary goal of many Irish mothers: for their child to succeed financially after obtaining a good education.

Economic Role and Political Influence

The primary goal of Irish women moving to America was economic opportunity, which meant that securing prompt employment was critical to their survival and success in the new country. The leading occupation that they chose was to work as a domestic servant in a middle class or wealthy American household, and while the Irish saw no real issue with this job, Americans saw being a domestic servant as "low status" and attached a social stigma to it.⁵² Many native-born American women would refuse to work in these jobs, so it was left to Irish and other immigrant women to fill the role. Due to this, there were often several job openings, and sometimes multiple advertisements ran in Irish newspapers looking for domestics.⁵³ There were actually many benefits to this position that Irish women took advantage of: the higher wages were of course attractive, and living with their employers helped these women to save enough money to send back home to Ireland or to help struggling relatives already living in the United

⁵⁰ State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1870 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

⁵¹ "Orphan's Fair," *Territorial Enterprise*, October 8, 1868.

⁵² Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 88.

⁵³ "Wanted," *Irish-American*, September 16, 1849.

States.⁵⁴ Another occupation that women chose was teaching school, which did not require a special degree at that time and was open to freshly educated young Irish women. For those women who did not find domestic work or teaching enticing, they could find work using their domestic skills as seamstresses, dressmakers, and laundry women. In east coast industrial cities in particular, women were also able to work in factories and textile mills to earn an income. Factory work was not their first choice, though, because it was dangerous, tiring, and lasted for long hours, but the wages were not very high.⁵⁵

For the Irish women living in Nevada, circumstances were different. There was not a large variety of jobs available, and as many women were already married, domestic work was not appealing to them since they would need to live away from their families. Remarkably, very few Irish-born women in Nevada worked as school teachers, the exception being the Catholic sisters of the Daughters of Charity. The most common occupations for these women, besides keeping house, was the keeping of lodging houses, laundry work, and being a seamstress.⁵⁶ Prostitution was one occupation also available to women in Nevada, though it was not a fairly common one; according to the 1880 census records, of the 2,232 Irish-born women living in Virginia City, only 77 of them or 3.4 percent were prostitutes.⁵⁷ The majority of previous studies into Irish prostitution have concluded that the social and religious structure of the Irish Catholic community served to strongly discourage sexual deviance of any kind, and some have even shown that most Irish prostitutes are actually Irish-American and not Irish-born immigrants, suggesting a “loosening of morals” in the next generation.⁵⁸ Specifically, in Chicago, Illinois, of

⁵⁴ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 91-92.

⁵⁵ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 76.

⁵⁶ State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1870 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

⁵⁷ State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1880 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

⁵⁸ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 116.

those foreign born women arrested for prostitution between 1905 and 1908, only 1.1 percent of them were Irish.⁵⁹ These studies show a trend that continued in those Irish women living in Nevada, as only a relatively small percentage of them were listed as prostitutes in the 1860, 1870, and 1880 United States census records for Storey County.⁶⁰ One author, however, has drawn very different conclusions from studying prostitution in the west. Anne M. Butler, in her study *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in American West 1865-1890* discusses Irish prostitutes only briefly, but presents a starkly dramatic and wholly negative perspective on the topic.

Battered and broken, the Irish immigrants did not look to education to secure trades and professions and careers; rather, they huddled in tenements until the ghettos were bursting at the seams. Then, surrounded by unemployment, starvation, and scorn, as their parents before them had migrated from village to city, first generation offspring often migrated from city to frontier. ...With generations of social malaise to condition them, the women among the Irish group made excellent candidates for prostitution.⁶¹

It is significant to note that Butler seems to refer primarily to the next generation of Irish, although her statement is confused by the use of “Irish immigrants” and “first generation offspring.” While the information encountered by this writer contradicts what Butler states, as limited resources were available during the course of research for this paper, a definitive repudiation cannot be made at this time.

There are two interesting and significant women that we can examine that present a picture of two types of economically independent women living in Virginia City, Nevada at this time: Mary McNair Mathews, widowed mother of one, and Caroline “Cad” Thompson, infamous

⁵⁹ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 117.

⁶⁰ State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1860, 1870, and 1880 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

⁶¹ Butler, Anne M., *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in American West 1865-1890*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 14.

madam. Cad Thompson was certainly an interesting figure, one that was well known but had little written about her. What we do know that she was born in Ireland, was living in Virginia City during the 1880 census, she was 53 years old at the time, was not married and had no children.⁶² She ran a house of prostitution widely known as the “Brick House,” that was seen as one of the more reputable brothels, and was located on D Street and Sutton Street, outside of the nearby “red light district.”⁶³ Her house even sometimes served as a hang out spot for some of the prominent men of Virginia City and nearby Gold Hill, as journalist Alfred Doten wrote multiple times in his journals of visiting her house “for a while.”⁶⁴ Her life was not without stigma and struggles; as it was recounted by both Doten and the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* that on November 18, 1866, several men stole a fire engine and drove to her “Brick House” in the middle of the night then proceeded to flood the entire house with water from the engine’s hose.⁶⁵ Not much more is known about her, but she definitely played a remarkable role in Virginia City life.

Mary McNair Mathews, on the other hand, has significantly more information available about her life, primarily because she wrote it down in a memoir originally published in 1880. Several of the scholars that wrote on the history of Virginia City have used her memoir to obtain a picture of what everyday life was like for women living in Virginia City during the time that she lived in Nevada (1869-1878), and though the forward’s author advises that some of the stories Mary tells are unsubstantiated, her book is still a useful resource.⁶⁶ Prior to her stint in Nevada, she lived in New York closer to her family, and was originally born in Ireland. Her life

⁶² State of Nevada Historic Preservation Office, Nevada, 1880 census, <http://nvshpo.org/component/census/>.

⁶³ “A Shameful Outrage,” *Territorial Enterprise*, November 19, 1866.

⁶⁴ Walter van Tilburg, ed., *The Journals of Alfred Doten*, (Reno: University of Nevada, Reno Press, 1973), vol. 2, 910.

⁶⁵ Tilburg, ed., *The Journals of Alfred Doten*, vol. 2, 905.

⁶⁶ Mary McNair Mathews, *Ten Years in Nevada or Life on the Pacific Coast*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 4.

in Virginia City began with the search to find a place to live and employment to support her and her son, as many other women traveling to the west find themselves if they do not have a husband. She befriended a few other women who were established and was able to obtain some work as a seamstress and temporary living arrangements.⁶⁷ Later, she is able to save enough money from her seamstress and sewing work to open a lodging house, which the remainder of her book discusses the comings and goings of her various guests.⁶⁸ Overall, her experience is unique because of her drive towards entrepreneurship and because she was a widow (as the majority of Irish women in Virginia City were married), however many of the struggles she experiences are similar to what other single and married women went through during this time.

Analogous to the financial woes of Mary McNair Mathews, other Irish women in Nevada had the same issue, as sometimes their husbands did not make enough money working in the mines to support large families.⁶⁹ They used their domestic skills to take side jobs, such as sewing, dressmaking, seamstress work, and laundry to facilitate the continuing functionality of their familial lives.⁷⁰ Some women made enough money that they could even spare some to advertise their services in the 1871-1872 Storey County Business Directory; these included Irish women such as domestic servant Anna Duffy, lodging house owners Kate Shea and Mrs. M. Wright, and M. Gallagher and Mary Sullivan who were both dressmakers.⁷¹ They were even able to pursue frivolous items with some of the money they earned by purchasing items such as fanciful dresses because fashion was one thing that many Irish women enjoyed tremendously.⁷² Spending hard earned money on things such as unnecessary clothing can be seen as a subtle sign

⁶⁷ Mathews, *Ten Years in Nevada*, 36-47.

⁶⁸ Mathews, *Ten Years in Nevada*, 118-120, 139-140.

⁶⁹ Ronald M. James, *The Roar and the Silence: A History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode*, (Reno: University of Nevada, Reno Press, 1998), 145.

⁷⁰ James, *The Roar and the Silence*, 145; James and Raymond, *Comstock Women*, 125.

⁷¹ Directory for Storey, Ormsby, Washoe, and Lyon Counties, 1871-1872.

⁷² Mathews, *Ten Years in Nevada*, 130-131; Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 76.

that these Irish women were making strides towards becoming economically successful, despite the obstacles in their way. They were beginning to pave the way for their sons and daughters to begin the process of upward mobility, which is fairly remarkable given the circumstances of living in the mining towns of early Nevada – Virginia City, Gold Hill, and Carson City.

The political influence of Irish immigrant women was not incredibly evident, but they were involved in the issues that were particularly important to their everyday lives. Starting with their work experiences in Ireland, women became involved in the labor movement there in the early twentieth century, but were previously involved in food riots, rallies, and boycotts during the 1850s and 1860s.⁷³ They also became involved in labor and unionization movements in east coast American cities such as New York and Boston due to their close associations with working in factories and textile mills. Irish women sought to have safer conditions and higher wages so that they could continue to support themselves and their families economically, because, as has been pointed out previously, their primary motivations were for the success of the family unit.⁷⁴ Despite the fact that Irish women were not able to participate in the political scene directly, they were able to influence some areas through their control of the household finances and through labor movements. It is also highly possible that Irish women participated in the brief women's suffrage movement that came to Nevada in 1869-1872, as it has been documented that several women living in and around Virginia City were interested in the possibility of suffrage.⁷⁵ In 1870, a "Women's Rights Ball" was held in Washoe Valley which several women from nearby cities attended⁷⁶, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton came to Virginia City to give a lecture on universal

⁷³ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 36-37.

⁷⁴ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 76-77.

⁷⁵ James W. Hulse and Jean Ford, "The First Battle for Woman Suffrage in Nevada: 1869-1871, Correcting and Expanding the Record," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 177-180.

⁷⁶ "Women's Rights Ball," *Territorial Enterprise*, January 8, 1870.

suffrage in 1871, which was attended by several women.⁷⁷ The journalist Alfred Doten even mentioned going to a women's suffrage lecture early in the movement given by Laura DeForce Gordon, although he mentioned that the audience was "very slim."⁷⁸ Ultimately, while Irish women did participate in some political movements, their lives were primarily concerned with the internal functions of their individual families and ensuring that their children succeeded accordingly, which in its own way is a form of significant political participation.

The Social Life of Irish Women

The social lives of Irish women in the nineteenth century were a mix of many diverse things that reflect the priorities of these women, but they were very different from the social lives of Irish men during the same period. Earlier, it was stated that men primarily ran a majority of the Emigrant Societies on the east coast that women might have participated in. Men also had many social clubs that they were able to be a part of, while women were restricted to only a few, and those were primarily church related. Even in Nevada, where women were a large portion of the society, the social clubs available were mostly men's groups and in fact, women's groups were almost never mentioned in newspapers surrounding the Virginia City area.⁷⁹ Mary McNair Mathews briefly referenced, however, that often women participated in men's groups, even if their participation was not documented.⁸⁰ The social world of nineteenth century America catered primarily to men, but women found other ways to socialize and to make their lives more enjoyable.

⁷⁷ "Miss Stanton's Lecture," *Territorial Enterprise*, August 27, 1871.

⁷⁸ Van Tilburg, *The Journals of Alfred Doten*, vol. 2, 1100.

⁷⁹ The indexed newspapers for Virginia City, Nevada list several men's groups (Fenian Brotherhood, Irish-American Brass Band, Knights of the Red Branch, and Irish Union Club to name a few) but one of the only references to women's groups that can be found is the Sons & Daughters of the Emerald Isle, which was ran primarily by men.

⁸⁰ Mathews, *Ten Years in Nevada*, 188-189.

One of the methods that women used to socialize, particularly upon newly arriving in the United States, was to correspond with far away family members and nearby friends that were not accessible daily. Letter writing was incredibly important to Irish women, because it allowed them to maintain contact with their families, whom they might not ever see again.⁸¹ Above, it was discussed the importance of correspondence networks to the building of community for Irish women, and these networks of friends were also important for maintaining a social conversation with others that shared similar interests and backgrounds. This habit of creating large networks of friends who wrote letters back and forth has been well documented for domestic servants living in east coast cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago.⁸² It is highly likely that Irish women in Nevada also pursued this past time with as much frequency, if not more due to the distance from probable friends and family living in other densely populated Irish areas, but information regarding personal correspondence of women living in Virginia City and the surrounding towns was not available at the time of this study.

The most important institution, especially in Nevada, that Irish women used were the Catholic Churches located in their neighborhood and the activities each sponsored. A large part of the importance of the church was the religious aspect, but the social connection and feelings of community that it fostered was certainly a significant portion as well. Domestic servants living in New York often fought their employers, or even quit their positions, in order to ensure that they had time to attend church services and other functions.⁸³ Dances were a very popular event, and sometimes charity balls were organized to fundraise for the church and related

⁸¹ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 51.

⁸² Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 117.

⁸³ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 138-139.

organizations.⁸⁴ Ladies fairs were fairs organized by women associated with the church to raise funds for a particular cause, and were very popular as well on the east coast and in Nevada cities and towns, with even Alfred Doten writing about these fairs for the *Gold Hill Daily News* and in his journal.⁸⁵

Beginning in 1864, a group of Irish-born and non-Irish women came to Virginia City from Los Angeles, California and opened a Catholic school and orphanage, which many women supported and contributed to.⁸⁶ The group was called the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, though many called them the Sisters of Charity, and the presence of this group also contributed to the social sphere of Irish women because they threw balls, fairs, had women volunteer for various projects,⁸⁷ and they even sometimes assisted with women obtaining employment or with obtaining Irish domestic servants to work in their homes.⁸⁸ These sisters came to Virginia City for a couple reasons, firstly because of their close relationship with Father Patrick Manogue who insisted on bringing the group to Virginia City, and second because they “expected to confront the social needs created by the bonanza atmosphere of a mining town.”⁸⁹ Their efforts in building and maintaining an orphan asylum and Catholic school had been incredibly successful in Los Angeles.⁹⁰ Conversely, the sisters experienced a much more resistant state government soon after arriving in Nevada. After issuing appeal after appeal to the

⁸⁴ *Irish-American*, August-December 1849, multiple charity balls were mentioned; “Ball To-Night,” *Territorial Enterprise*, October 14, 1868.

⁸⁵ “Ladies Fairs,” *Virginia City Daily Safeguard*, October 8, 1868; “The Fair,” *Territorial Enterprise*, October 10, 1868; “Orphan’s Fair,” *Territorial Enterprise*, September 17, 1868; Van Tilburg, *The Journals of Alfred Doten*, vol. 2, 817.

⁸⁶ Carolyn Beaupre, *A Quiet Contribution: Women on the Comstock*.

⁸⁷ “Orphan’s Fair,” *Territorial Enterprise*, October 8, 1868.

⁸⁸ “Wanted,” *Territorial Enterprise*, April 28, 1868.

⁸⁹ Relationship, Carolyn Beaupre, *A Quiet Contribution: Women on the Comstock*; Social needs, James and Raymond, *Comstock Women*, 147.

⁹⁰ Gloria Lothrop, “Challenges into Opportunities: The Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Southern California,” *Journal of the West* 48, no. 2 (Spring 2009), 67.

state legislature for Nevada and failing to obtain long term funding, the sisters had to close their doors in 1897 and leave Virginia City.⁹¹

Conclusion: The Legacy of Irish Women

The influence that these nineteenth century Irish immigrant women left for their sons and daughters is significant, particularly in their advocacy for the furtherance of their children's education. This impetus was ultimately represented in two ways; first, the Irish women who became teachers were able to influence the educational system and therefore their children's education in general, and second, the establishment of higher schools of education for women.⁹² A major result was the variety of occupations and careers available to the next generation, which was the first generation born in America; occupations like nursing, journalism, writing (novelist, poet, and essayist), librarianship, and more became available due to the higher educational opportunities available to young women.⁹³ Even later, as teaching became a job that required more and more education in order to be employable, second generation Irish women were able to take advantage of the doors that their mothers had opened.⁹⁴

The expanding field of occupations also contributed to the general upward mobility of the next generation of Irish men and women. This process had even begun during the first generation of Irish immigrant women's attempt to financially succeed. As Hasia Diner points out, "With the... assertive determination of Irish women to actualize their goals, Irish women did experience a steady movement out of the ranks of domestic service into white-collar and semi-

⁹¹ "The Sisters Appeal," *Territorial Enterprise*, February 11, 1877; Closure, Carolyn Beaupre, *A Quiet Contribution: Women on the Comstock*.

⁹² Education, Janet Nolan, *Servants of the Poor: Teachers and Mobility in Ireland and Irish America*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 4-5; "Female Medical School," *The Pilot*, August 24, 1850; "Buffalo Academy for Young Ladies," *The Pilot*, August 10, 1850.

⁹³ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 94-95.

⁹⁴ Nolan, *Servants of the Poor*, 62-63.

professional positions.”⁹⁵ Later, she continues, “...they [second generation Irish] were streaming into offices as secretaries, typists...trained in both the public and Catholic schools to assume these cleaner jobs, which clearly carried with them greater status and higher pay.”⁹⁶ Janet Nolan confirms this in her study of Irish immigrant teachers and their daughters, as she examines their experiences in three major cities across the country and concludes that Irish women were ahead of other women among their supposed economic class in terms of economic success and education levels after just one generation.⁹⁷

This trend was not unique to the east coast, or even major metropolitans in the west like San Francisco, California; the next generation of Irish women benefited from their mothers’ push for education and financial success, and some of these women moved on to be considered pioneers for women in general in Nevada.⁹⁸ Jessie Callahan Mahoney’s parents were both born in Ireland and eventually travelled to Austin City, Nevada where their daughter was born in 1887. Jessie grew up to marry into a prominent Irish ranching family (the Mahoneys), and she eventually also became a teacher, postmistress, and finally the Eureka County Commissioner.⁹⁹ In a related profession, Sarah Thompson Olds was born in 1875 to an Irish mother and a Scottish father, married A.J. Olds in California, they eventually returned to Nevada and raised their family on several ranches where both Sarah and her husband worked as homesteaders.¹⁰⁰ Finally, Mary G. Rose was both in 1875 in Winnemucca, Nevada to Irish-born parents who migrated to America in the 1860s. Mary grew up to become a teacher and to become the first woman legislator in Humboldt County, and the second woman to appear on a general election ballot in

⁹⁵ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America*, 94.

⁹⁶ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America*, 95.

⁹⁷ Nolan, *Servants of the Poor*, 66.

⁹⁸ M.A. Duval, ed., *Skirts that Swept the Desert Floor: One Hundred Biographical Profiles of Nevada Women in History*, (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2006), 7.

⁹⁹ Duval, *Skirts that Swept the Desert Floor*, 116-117.

¹⁰⁰ Duval, *Skirts that Swept the Desert Floor*, 132-133.

the same county.¹⁰¹ These few profiles present just some of the successes that the thousands of second generation Irish women were able to accomplish after using the tools and encouragement that their mothers gave them.

As has been evidenced throughout this paper, the Irish immigrant women that began the long journey to the United States did not have it easy. They sometimes had to struggle financially to obtain the money for passage, although some were able to obtain help through their employers or landlords. Once they arrived in the New World, employment was easy to obtain, especially if they were looking to become domestic servants or factory workers. Their families already living in the United States helped them when they could, but primarily Irish women saved and sent money to ill family members or those loved ones left behind in Ireland who were still dealing with the consequences of the Famine. After a few years working and saving money, Irish women decided to take a husband and often found one through church dances, then some made the move out west after tiring of big city life. Their experiences in Nevada were different from those in east coast cities because of the circumstances surrounding them: the need to build a community and social network anew as well as the lack of an extensive group of eligible Irish and their experiences living in a mining town. Despite lack of social resources, women built their own networks and social groups using the church, their neighbors, and even a Catholic sisterhood known as the Daughters of Charity. Ultimately, Irish immigrant women in Nevada were able to create a pathway for their children to succeed through the use of education and financial opportunities granted by their parents.

¹⁰¹ Duval, *Skirts that Swept the Desert Floor*, 158-159.

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