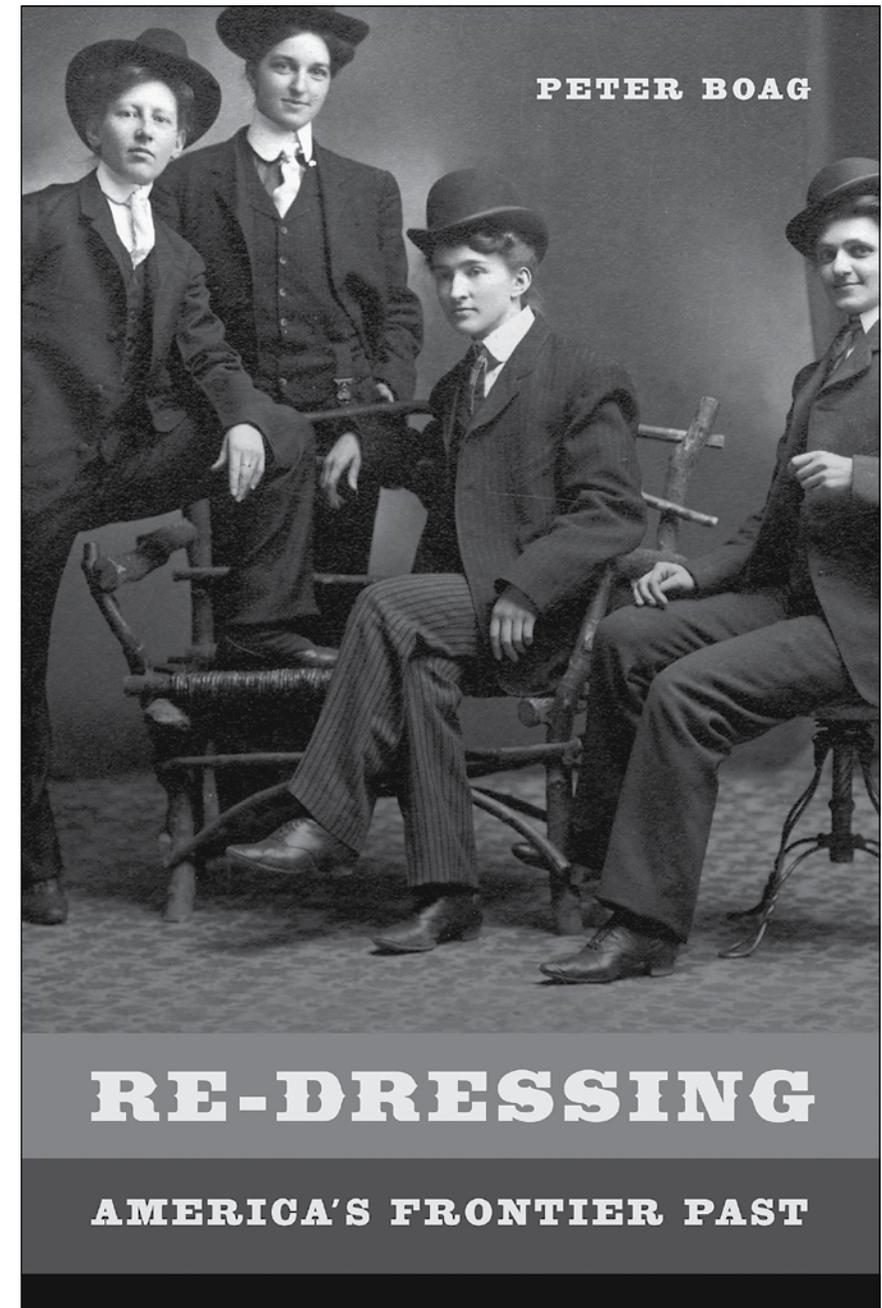


The Trouble with Cross-Dressers

Researching and Writing the History of Sexual and Gender Transgressiveness in the Nineteenth-Century American West

FOR NEARLY A DECADE, I have been researching and writing about women who dressed and lived as men and men who lived and dressed as women in the nineteenth-century American West. During that time, when people asked me about my work, my response was invariably met with a quizzical expression and then the inevitable question: “Were there really such people?” Newspapers document hundreds, in fact, and it is likely there were many more. Historians have been writing about cross-dressers for some time, and we know that such people have existed in all parts of the world and for about as long as we have recorded and remembered history.¹ Nevertheless, in general, people do not associate cross-dressing, or at least certain elements of what it might imply, with the historic American West. Images of gun-toting, tobacco-chewing, buckskin-clad Calamity Jane may come to mind, but most people will not expect that women who actually thought themselves to be men and men who dressed and lived as women were present in the nineteenth-century West, a place and time that resonates with manly men and womanly women! Over the years, western historians have smashed such gendered stereotypes, laboring long and hard to produce a remarkably rich literature on the multi-faceted gendered lives of women in western history. Recently, historians have also started to critically dissect the many nuances of western masculinity.² That literature paints a considerably more complex gendered world of the Old West than do the standard stereotypes. And yet, such literature has largely remained silent on the complicated



Historian Peter Boag's Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past will be published this fall by the University of California Press. It is the outcome of his years of research on the Old West's men who dressed and lived as women and women who dressed and lived as men.



Flora Quick, a native of the Ozark Mountains, became Tom King and terrorized Oklahoma Territory's South Canadian River region for years. Apparently addicted to all sorts of crimes, she was best known as a horse thief. She turned to male clothing for disguise; it often helped her elude authorities. Quick was a western cross-dresser whose life newspapers sensationalized and, whether true or not, heterosexualized by linking her with a male lover who also turned desperado.

or male) “opposite” of what society would typically assign to their bodies. I place “opposite” in quotation marks because the notion that female and male are somehow diametric to each other is a historical creation; scholars

gender identities that cross-dressing might expose.

In October of this year, the University of California Press will release my book *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*. It is a history of cross-dressing, broadly conceived, from roughly the time of the California Gold Rush to just after the last of the western (continental) territories became states. It explores the lives of people who cross-dressed and did so for multiple reasons — some to commit or escape detection for crimes; some, notably women, to more easily and safely travel through the region; some for matters related to gaining employment; and some because they identified themselves as people of the other sex. I encountered a variety of troubles in producing this book: deciding on appropriate terminology for the diversity of cross-dressers I uncovered, turning up records about such people, and conceiving my project in what amounts to a historiographical vacuum on the topic for the American West. These various issues, moreover, impinged on each other.

A central argument of my book is that many nineteenth-century western Americans who cross-dressed did so to express their transgender identity. *Transgender* is a term coined only during the last quarter of the twentieth century. It refers to people who identify with the gender (female

have shown, for example, that in the not-too-distant past, people in western civilization understood that there was only one sex and that male and female simply occupied different gradations on a single scale.³ That at one time the western world held to a one-sex or one-gender model, but later developed a two-sex or two-gender model, clearly shows that social conceptualization of gender, sex, and even sexuality changes over time. This reveals a problem that confronts historians: it is anachronistic to impose our present-day terms and concepts for and about gender and sexuality — such as *transgender* — onto the past.

In *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*, I therefore strove to avoid the term *transgender* as much as possible. It is central to my study, however, to show that people in the nineteenth century had their own concepts and expressions for gender fluidity. By the end of the nineteenth century, for example, sexologists (medical doctors and scientists who study sex) had created the terms “sex invert” and “sexual inversion” to refer to people whose sexual desires and gender presentations (that is, the way they walked and talked, the clothing they wanted to wear, and so forth) did not, according to social views, conform to what their physiological sex should “naturally” dictate. Sexologists and much of the public accepted that, for example, the sexual desire for a female, the longing to wear pants, and a certain manly swagger in the walk were all feelings and traits that sprang forth from the male body. If a man had sexual desires for another man — a feminine trait — he also (it was supposed) wished to dress in women's clothing and had other feminine characteristics. The German jurist and sex reformer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895), whose writings influenced sexologists of his day, described such people as males born with female souls.⁴

Late-nineteenth-century sexologists applied “sexual inversion” broadly to people who, as the years passed, later became identified distinctly and separately as transgender, transsexual, transvestite, and homosexual. The word *transsexual* emerged during the 1940s and 1950s, as developments in medical technology allowed individuals who felt they had the wrong body to surgically change those bodies to comport with their feelings. Although transsexual overlaps with transgender, transgender is somewhat more comprehensive in scope; it includes people who may feel themselves to have a gender “opposite” of what their bodies might indicate but who are unable, or simply do not want, to change their bodies. Transgender people might also identify as neither female nor male. *Transvestite* typically refers to someone who, for reasons unrelated to gender and sexual identity, gains emotional sustenance by dressing as the “opposite” sex; the concept began to emerge in the scientific literature during the first few years of the twentieth century, but it took many years to catch on. The word *homosexual* appeared



Born Elvira Virginia Mugarietta in San Francisco in 1869, Jack Garland (who the press sometimes affectionately called Babe Bean) lived in the Bay Area until his death in 1936. Because it was a crime at that place and time to intentionally disguise one's sex with clothing of the "opposite" sex, while wearing men's garb, Garland freely admitted he was a woman, claiming therefore that he was not trying to hide his true physiological identity. Authorities pretty much left him alone, though the press did not.

brought a divorce suit against her husband Sam a few months after their marriage and when she discovered his female anatomy. Journalists reeling from the sensation dubbed Sam a "man-woman" and sometimes called him the "What-is-it"; both terms appear elsewhere in the West into the early twentieth century. "What-is-it" captures a certain social questioning as to whether the two recognized genders and sexes might coexist in an individual, and "man-woman" suggests that people during the latter nineteenth century

at the same time as did *sex invert*; through at least the first quarter of the twentieth century, the two terms were used interchangeably. Slowly, during the early twentieth century, *homosexual* came to relate specifically to sexual desire rather than, like *sex invert*, to gender presentation and identity. *Homosexual* came to mean that a woman, for example, who had sexual desires for another woman did not necessarily also have other "manly" traits; rather, she could be a fully "feminine" woman in the eyes of society.

The late-nineteenth-century science concept of sex invert percolated down to broader society. Consider the case of Eugene de Forest in Los Angeles. By all reports, de Forest had the body of a woman, but he considered himself to be a man, dressing and living as one. Authorities arrested him in 1915 for attempting, a second time, to marry a woman. Newspapers got hold of the story and openly speculated on de Forest's "queer condition" and asked if "she" might actually be "a woman with the soul of a man."⁵ More popular terms for sexual inversion, such as *queer*, likewise dispersed through the late-nineteenth-century American West. In late-1870s Tuscarora, Nevada, Marancy Pollard

believed such coexistence was possible. Likewise does the amalgamated name "Samrah," which papers even more derisively employed for Sam Pollard when they learned that his given name was Sarah.⁶ This clearly shows, moreover, that everyday people did not merely receive ideas about sexuality and gender from sexologists. Rather, they had their own views and opinions on these matters. These sometimes challenged, sometimes reinforced, and sometimes altered scientific understandings.

In *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*, I explore the meaning, cogency, and usage of period terms such as *queer*, *sex invert*, *man-woman*, and *What-is-it*. But as with *transgender*, although for different reasons, I avoided consistently applying those terms to the subjects of my book; even though they are accurate for the era, they have negative connotations. Many people who dressed as the "opposite" sex in the Old West, furthermore, did so for matters of expediency, safety, and employment and not because of identity; therefore referring to them as sex inverts, for example, is simply inaccurate. Instead, I chose the more neutral term *cross-dresser*. It is convenient for its capaciousness but useful only to a point. The term was not used in that exact iteration during the nineteenth century; sources more commonly referred, rather, to a woman who was "dressed in male attire" and a man who was "dressed in female attire." Too, cross-dressing implies that when one does dress and behave as a person of the "opposite" sex, that person is attempting to cross (at least in appearance, if not in identity) from one sex and gender to another. Still, it is clear that when one dresses as the sex with which one identifies — even when one has a body that, according to society's demands, indicates he or she should dress otherwise — this is an act that confirms who one is. One is hardly *crossing* in that instance.

This leads to another point: I often ran up against our language's deficiencies when it comes to expressing gender complexity and uncertainty. English insists that we use pronouns, possessives, and objects that are decidedly gendered (she, her, he, him, and his). But what does one do when one is unsure of the gender of the person one is writing about, or when society clearly thinks one thing about someone's gender, but the subject in question thinks something entirely different about him/her/self? I tried to choose terms that conformed to what I reasoned the person I was writing about would have wanted. That is a highly suspect undertaking. Can we ever really know what people's feelings are, especially when we try to determine them based on old documents such as sensational newspaper accounts? As a result of questions such as this, I never became completely satisfied with a prose that depended on an inadequate language. Rather, I consigned myself to what all historians do at some point or another: taking a leap of faith and hoping the evidence is there to support one's landing.

Another problem that confronts historians of sexuality is that, in their collecting, most archives and public records repositories have for years ignored topics such as homosexuality and transgenderism for the simple fact that they were considered socially anathema. All historians confront collections that have been shaped by the social attitudes that existed at the time the collecting was done. Still, it seems historians of sexuality and gender are at a greater disadvantage, not only because people's intimate lives for so long were considered a topic irrelevant to history, but also because prejudice against "transgressive" sexuality and gender still persists, continuing to shape decisions about what should be saved and discarded. One of my favorite illustrations of the power of those choices comes from the experiences of independent scholar Allan Bérubé (1946–2007). In 1990, he published *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*.⁷ This award-winning book was later turned into an award-winning documentary film, and the book became an important reason why in 1996 the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation awarded Bérubé the prestigious MacArthur grant, which some have dubbed the "genius grant." *Coming Out Under Fire* may never have been written at all, however. It is largely based on hundreds of World War II letters between gay GIs that a friend of Bérubé's neighbor just happened to spy one day in a dumpster. He retrieved them and kept them stashed in a closet until the day Bérubé's neighbor learned of their existence.⁸

Thankfully, more and more research archivists today have started to collect material on the history of gender and sexuality, and even on homosexuality and transgenderism, and some institutions have developed archives since the 1970s that are devoted exclusively to these issues.⁹ Still, these collections tend to pertain to the twentieth century, and especially the period since the 1950s, when the issues they document became especially relevant and when, regrettably, many older records had already been long lost. It is vital to note, however, that lurking within older archives and public-records repositories is material on homosexuality and transgenderism that inadvertently made its way into such institutions — hidden passages in an odd diary here, police logs and court records that refer to same-sex crimes there. Locating these sources often requires a great deal of patience and diligence, methods I employed working on my earlier book, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (2003).¹⁰

That book focuses on the era from 1890 to 1930 and concerns the origins of a gay-male subculture in Portland and the Pacific Northwest as well as social and legal reactions to it. When researching, I spent exhausting weeks at the Portland city archives, for example, laboring page-by-page through cartons and cartons of city council documents, mayor's office correspon-

dence, detective daybooks, and some fifty years of police blotters, looking for clues about homosexuality. The police arrest records occasionally named "sodomy" as the crime for which someone was apprehended. Occasionally, the word *sodomy* was crossed out and a lesser offense substituted, such as "lewd conduct," "vagrancy," or "indecent exposure." The police were not necessarily trying to cover up something considered particularly heinous, but rather, the evidence they had for the more seriously penalized crime of sodomy was perhaps not that strong. The records further suggested to me that I had better look seriously into all crimes listed as "vagrancy," "lewd conduct," and so forth, as they might reveal the types of material I was seeking. Portland authorities typically sent people arrested for those offenses to the Multnomah County Circuit Court for prosecution. Those records are accessible (I use the term generously) on scratchy microfilm at the Multnomah County Courthouse in downtown Portland, where I spent weeks searching through poorly organized indices, written in old handwriting and photographed in negative format. Those led me to other microfilm rolls of trial-related documents. After hours and hours of searching, many of the cases turned out to have nothing at all to do with what I had hoped to find.

In such materials, however, I eventually turned up significantly more relevant information than I was able to include in *Same-Sex Affairs*. And yet, those multitudinous materials allowed me to tell only a quite compromised part of the story I originally had hoped to narrate. They are public records after all, and because they deal with people who came before the law, they only reveal a very narrow slice of the social story. Due to social prejudices at the time, working-class, itinerant, and racial and ethnic minority men ended up in arrest records at far greater rates than white middle-class men. Also, because of the highly gendered nature of the public realm at the turn of the twentieth century, few women actually made it into the records I had at my disposal. Thus, I found distressingly little on female same-sex sexuality. But for women about whom information on sexual transgressiveness was forthcoming, many also dressed and lived as men. Because they caused considerable sensation, such women usually became the subject of news stories, materials also well-preserved and accessible on microfilm. Still, in the end, I ran across only a handful. This led me to the difficult decision to mostly leave women out of *Same-Sex Affairs*. The records available to me also yielded relatively little about some historic aspects of male homosexuality I had expected to find. Scholars already had shown that cross-dressing was an element of some early twentieth-century gay male subcultures, for example, but the records I came across in the Pacific Northwest revealed very few such individuals.

I thought I would someday use the few documents about women cross-dressing I had collected for an article on the subject. I did write such an article, but I also soon found that I was able to expand my documentary base, thanks to new technologies then becoming more widely available.¹¹ Those tools revolutionized my research and ultimately made possible the writing of *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*. The most notable technology is digitalization. In the “old” days, one could spend weeks, months, perhaps years diligently searching through a relatively short run of just one newspaper from one city. One might have been aided by newspaper indices, where available, which were typically produced by volunteers at a historical society, such as those who created the *Oregonian* index at the Oregon Historical Society. Unsurprisingly, such volunteers were quite careful about what they indexed, leaving aside matters of homosexuality. Too, they tended to index the major and thus “upstanding” newspapers such as the *Oregonian*, whereas many of the more revealing social stories were carried and explored in the working-class press — papers and tabloids that also stood less chance of being preserved by the people who organized and maintained collections at early historical societies. Today’s digitalized newspaper databases have at least partially lifted the veil that well-meaning archival caretakers had placed over such documents. Through keyword searches, one can explore just about any topic in myriad newspapers from myriad places, covering decades or longer and within the matter of a few minutes.

My searches for cross-dressers yielded hundreds and hundreds from across the American West. Many, to my great surprise and even greater pleasure, were men who dressed and even lived as women in the Old West. Of course, digitalized newspapers have their limitations. A researcher has to do a great deal of detective work to figure out what terms to use in searches. Some databases are more responsive than others. Not all papers have been digitalized, and those that have tend to be the more mainstream press. And many digital databases, contrary to what they say about the best things in life, are not free. Moreover, in the case of my research, the question remains: Just how many cross-dressers never made it into newspapers because they, or rather their bodies, never saw the light of day? Cross-dressers revealed in the press, therefore, are cross-dressers of a certain type and thus perhaps not all that representative.

Because of that limitation, I also employed more traditional methods of historical research. At the Little Bighorn Battlefield in Montana, for example, I spent several days digging up details about Mrs. Nash, whose story had been partially told by Elizabeth Bacon Custer in her 1885 memoir *Boots and Saddles, Or Life in Dakota with General Custer*. Nash was born in Mexico, found a position as a laundress in the Seventh Cavalry in 1868, and remained

in its service for the next decade. Over those years, Nash married three times to enlisted men, all the while keeping secret (to the rest of the post, anyway) the nature of her male anatomy — until she died of appendicitis in late October 1878 and her body was prepared for burial. At the Little Bighorn, I studied some well-known and not-so-well-known manuscripts relevant to Nash as well as Seventh Cavalry muster rolls, wherein I discovered Nash’s first two husbands, men whose identities have somewhat eluded historians until now.

As you might imagine, when the mystery of Nash came to light in 1878, it caused something of a sensation. Newspapers across the country carried stories about the whole affair. The newspaper in Bismarck, Dakota Territory (the closest town to Fort Abraham Lincoln, where the Seventh Cavalry was stationed at the time of Nash’s death) was not available to me digitally. I therefore obtained and searched it the old-fashioned way: interlibrary loan and microfilm readers. To be sure, papers proved vitally important to telling Nash’s and other cross-dressers’ stories, but because I know that in the nineteenth century, those publications paid their bills through running, and even embellishing on, the most shocking accounts, I also had to explore other sorts of documents to gauge more accurately local community sentiment about cross-dressers as well as to better surmise what the cross-dressers thought about themselves. In Nash’s case, the national press suggested that she was something of an outsider at Fort Lincoln, that other laundresses feared her, and that people had long suspected her gender to be other than what she presented. But old manuscripts that contain eyewitness accounts



New York's National Police Gazette, February 15, 1879

Mrs. Nash worked as a laundress for the United States Seventh Cavalry, starting in 1868. Over the following decade, she married three times to enlisted men. Her first two husbands both reportedly stole her savings and deserted her and the army. Her third husband, however, remained with her for some time. On Nash's death in late October 1878, a fellow washwoman, who prepared the body for burial, discovered Nash's male anatomy. The story became national news, and many reporters began to use racist language after they learned of Nash's Mexican heritage.



Believing they had brought a daughter into the world, in the late fall of 1879, Samuel and Dony Martin named their new child Bertha. As Bertha grew into adulthood, however, she became a he, married, and eventually fathered several children. Convicted of horse stealing in Nebraska in 1900, Martin ended up at the state penitentiary, sent there as a man. A few months later, a cellmate who had become suspicious of Martin's physiology whispered his doubts to a guard. Authorities examined Martin and declared him a female, but were never quite convinced. Upset by Martin's ambiguity, the Nebraska governor commuted his sentence, declaring the state's charge "a sexual monstrosity, unfit for association with men or women."

able digitally) for more information. One afternoon, while searching for a particular cross-dresser, I chanced on another — Bert/Bertha Martin, a person I had not come across in my digitalized searches, showing again the limitations of that otherwise marvelous resource. Martin was born in 1879

— the writings of Elizabeth Bacon Custer and others as well as the *Bismarck Tribune*, which sent local reporters to cover the story — reveal a somewhat different story. They describe Nash as a highly respected member of the Fort Lincoln community, well integrated into daily life there, and accepted as a woman. Moreover, Seventh Cavalry people prized Nash for her culinary creations, depended on her decorating talents for post soirees, and relied on her skills as a midwife. Officers' wives, furthermore, took advantage of her for her ability to carefully launder delicate fabrics. However useful digitalized newspapers are, the information they reveal is rather limited, as the case of Nash demonstrates.

As any forthcoming historian can tell you, research involves a great deal of serendipity. So it was with *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*. Before heading to Lincoln, Nebraska, in November 2008 to conduct more conventional research at the Nebraska State Historical Society, I armed myself with a number of newspaper references to cases of Nebraska cross-dressers. I wanted to look at local papers (not yet avail-

in Missouri. In 1900, authorities in Keya Paha County, Nebraska, arrested and convicted him on a charge of horse theft. Sent to prison as a man, a few months later, his cell-mate whispered his suspicions about Martin's sex to penitentiary guards. An exam promptly followed. When the results were in, embarrassed officials forced Martin to don women's apparel and shipped him over to the female side of the prison. This turned out to be much more than a simple matter of cross-dressing, as my subsequent research through incarceration records, census reports, and various other local newspapers revealed. While Martin's parents clearly thought him a female at birth and raised him as such, Martin later became a man, married, and even fathered several children. He likely had ambiguous genitalia. Various penitentiary documents make that apparent, and newspaper articles even alluded to it eventually. When intrepid reporters tracked down one of Martin's cousins in Long Pine, Nebraska, for example, she confirmed that although the family understood Martin to be a female as a child, during "her" younger years "she" also "had many attributes of a male person and other peculiar characteristics."¹²

My favorite serendipitous moment involving digitalized sources came as I engaged in my hobby of family history. It all happened early one morning as I worked away, tracking down my family in databases available through Ancestry.com. My Boag ancestors migrated from Canada to Minnesota in about 1870, later coming to the Pacific Northwest. My family is neither famed nor fortuneed, so to do its history requires that one turn over every stone. That morning, I chanced on a digitalized copy of a Meeker County, Minnesota, history published in 1877. Since the Boags lived in Meeker County at the time of that history's publication, I thought perhaps they had made it into the volume. They did not.

But someone else did. One of the cross-dressers I had been tracing in my research was a female-to-male figure who had been born Lucy Ann Lobdell in about 1829 in upstate New York. Lobdell made a living as a hunter and trapper and, after transforming into a man in about 1855, headed west to Minnesota Territory and plied his backcountry trades there. Lobdell is one of the better known nineteenth-century female-to-male persons. Partly this is due to the fact that he lived out his last days in New York's Willard Asylum for the Insane. A medical doctor there examined him and wrote about his case for a well-known journal. That study is now recognized as one of the earliest of its types in North America. Because Lobdell's life has left a number of important documents, historians of sexuality and gender have occasionally written about him. But nowhere before my discovery had I ever seen information about Lobdell's time in Minnesota Territory. Of all the places in Minnesota he could have gone, of all the local histories that could have

made it into digitalized format, of all the places my Boag family might have settled, everything aligned at the particular moment when I casually came across *A Random Historical Sketch of Meeker County, Minnesota*; it devotes an entire chapter to Lobdell. He had been there in the mid 1850s when, luckily for me but not for him, he had a wardrobe malfunction that revealed him to have a body of a woman. Since my “discovery,” other sources citing this county history and additional important sources on Lobdell have appeared on the internet.¹³

EVEN THOUGH HISTORIANS in recent years have markedly complicated women’s and gender history of the American West, very little of the literature they have produced has examined issues of sexual and gender identity among the region’s female-to-male cross-dressers.¹⁴ Other than the example of Nash, male-to-female cross-dressers have also largely escaped the attention of western historians.¹⁵ Anthropologists, on the other hand, have created an extensive and analytically sophisticated literature about the cross-gendered practices of both male and female Native Americans in the West.¹⁶ The lack of attention to western cross-dressers who were not Native Americans, whether female-to-male or especially male-to-female, may have to do with the difficulties historians have faced uncovering evidence for their existence. Still, as I began to organize my research for *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, I wondered how it could be that anthropologists had found ample evidence in old documents about western Native American cross-gendered practices and people, but historians (until now) have not been able to do the same for Euro-Americans. I also puzzled over the related and much larger question: How could it be that hundreds and hundreds of Euro-American female-to-male and male-to-female people existed and had their stories (whether accurately or otherwise) told, discussed, and editorialized at great length in the most public of public sources (newspapers), but these same people and all that they meant and stood for have been forgotten in our memories of western and frontier past — so forgotten that historians professionally trained in advanced research methods have not known where to turn for evidence about them?

Responding to this troubling question became a major part of *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*. Fully one half of the book is dedicated to the argument that our forgetting can be related to two monumental events at the end of the nineteenth century. One was the so-called “closing” of the frontier. The other was the development of our modern gender and sexual system — that is, the creation of the categories of homosexual and heterosexual, the division of people into these categories, and the identification of cross-dressing with the former. These two events, I had long suspected, not

only were contemporaneous but also were related. Cross-dressers allowed me to explore that relationship.

As my research revealed, many cross-dressers passed through or made their home in the American West during the nineteenth century. They were very much a part of everyday life, integrated into it in amazing ways. But at the end of the nineteenth century, cross-dressing in the western world, the American nation, and the American West increasingly came to be seen as a sign of sexual and gender deviance. At the end of the nineteenth century, the so-called “frontier” also seemed to be vanishing. A host of writers, historians, politicians, and other cultural arbiters drew attention to the phenomenon, noted its significance, and worried about what it meant for the future. In doing so, they transformed the history of the frontier into the central story of the American nation. As historian Frederick Jackson Turner put it in his breathtaking and influential 1893 treatise “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”:

The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development. . . . And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.¹⁷

The sexual and gender deviance represented by cross-dressers, I explain in my book, could not be part of this fundamentally American story. Period writers, historians, mythmakers, and even sexologists undertook to eliminate the troublesome cross-dressers from America’s origin story — that is, from its frontier and western past. Nevertheless, female-to-male cross-dressers have hardly been forgotten in western American history and myth. The Black Hills’ Calamity Jane instantly comes to mind. But others among the fairly well-known are Idaho’s Joe Monahan, California’s Charley Parkhurst, and Colorado’s various Mountain Charleys. Writers produced sensational newspaper articles and, in some cases, dime novels about such women during their lives or immediately on their deaths, when their “true” physiologies were uncovered. Local and even national authors worked hard to transform those individuals into women respectable in both gender and sexuality. In part, they did so by borrowing from evolving western myth — particularly that which held that the frontier had been a primarily male place — stating as fact that any self-respecting woman who wanted to make it on her own in the historically male-dominated West could have done so only through disguising herself as a man. Voila. By fitting those women into the myth, heterosexuality and “normal” womanhood were secured. Subsequently, writers of popular books and scholarly articles and even producers of motion



Men who dressed as women have been all but obliterated from popular memory about the Old West. John Runk (1878–1964), pictured here, was a photographer in Stillwater, Minnesota, and remained single his entire adult life. Because of his dedication to his craft, his interest in his surroundings, and possibly the time he had on his hands as an unattached person, he took thousands of photographs of Minnesota scenes and preserved countless historical images that others had made. He also created a series of images of himself in women's clothing, including this one, where he is shown at a sewing machine literally re-dressing what we think we know about the Trans-Mississippi West.

pictures have uncritically accepted those sources, and thus have continued the tradition of heterosexualizing and gender-normalizing the cross-dressers when many of them evinced transgender identities and same-sex sexualities.

The effeminacy and apparent same-sex sexuality of western American male-to-female cross-dressers represented a more serious problem at the turn of the twentieth century: they ran diametrically counter to what the frontier and the American West were coming to symbolize. The western gender myths that could contain, explain, and rehabilitate female-to-male cross-dressers could not do the same in the case of male-to-females. There was no way to transform them into something respectable, so male-to-female cross-dressers had to be eliminated altogether. Creators of western and frontier history and myth accomplished that erasure in a most fascinating way. As the myth of the West and frontier developed, those places were conceived of as both male and white spaces. The cast of characters who Turner, for example, identified as central to America's frontier past was composed of a succession of Euro-American men who headed west — explorers, hunters, traders, cattlemen, surveyors, and especially agrarians. He gave them credit for American development. Male-to-female cross-dressing and the various facets of effeminacy it represented became associated especially with non-Anglo races in late-nineteenth-century America. Stripping effeminacy and same-sex sexuality from Euro-Americans and placing them onto Asians, Mexicans, African Americans, and Indians removed the taint of sexual and gender transgressiveness from the Old West altogether, because in the socially dominant view of the era, such people were not part of the frontier process. This rendered America's frontier past not only a white male place and time, but also a heterosexual and “gender-normal” place and time as well.

The turn-of-the-twentieth-century projects that heterosexualized some western cross-dressers and eliminated others from the frontier also had a scientific counterpart. The incidents of sexual inversion appeared to grow and spread at the end of the nineteenth century, and that troubled American sexologists. They attributed that increase in part to modernity — to the startlingly novel effects of urbanization, industrialization, steam power, and electricity. Sexologists believed these weakened the nervous system, leaving it open to infection by diseases such as sexual inversion. It only stood to reason that rural, frontier, and western America, places that had largely escaped modernization (in the eyes of sexologists and others at the time), were not thusly affected. George M. Beard (1839–1883) argued that “those who live out-doors and work with the muscle more than with the mind — are not tormented with sexual desire to the same degree or in the same way as the hysterical, the sensitive, the nervous — those who live in-doors and use mind much and muscle very little.”¹⁸

In light of the above, I admit that *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* turned into something more than what I had originally envisioned. Such a revelation is hardly shocking: typically, the process of research and writing leads the historian in directions entirely unanticipated at the beginning of a project. But I will say that I was wholly unprepared to find that, in an odd sort of way, cross-dressers lay at the very heart of western and frontier history and myth. That is, I found that western and frontier history and myth have been written and constructed in conscious denial of the well-known existence of cross-dressers. The re-dressing in *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*, then, became a twofold project. On the one hand, I literally re-dressed America's frontier past by exposing the pervasiveness of cross-dressers there and the ways they were integrated into everyday western life (that was my original goal). On the other hand, I ended up *redressing* the received wisdom about gender and sexual norms that we have long taken for granted about the frontier, the nineteenth-century West, and the American nation. I let the surprisingly and richly documented existence of frontier cross-dressers take me where they would. The path that they led me down ultimately sent me to the foundation of America's unreal past as a heterosexual time and place.

NOTES

1. A few examples are: Francisco Vázquez García and Richard Cleminson, "Subjectivities in Transition: Gender and Sexual Identities in Cases of 'Sex Change' and 'Hermaphroditism' in Spain, c. 1500–1800," *History of Science* 48:1 (March 2010): 1–38; Evelyn Blackwood, "Gender Transgression in Colonial and Postcolonial Indonesia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 64:4 (November 2005): 849–79; Charles Upchurch, "Forgetting the Unthinkable: Cross-Dressers and British Society in the Case of the Queen vs. Boulton and Others," *Gender & History* 12:1 (April 2000): 127–57; Kathleen Brown, "'Changed . . . into the fashion of man': The Politics of Sexual Difference in a Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Settlement," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6:2 (October 1995): 171–93; and Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

2. See, for example, Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in

the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49:2 (May 1980): 173–213; Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus, eds., *One Step Over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American Wests* (Edmonton, Canada: University of Alberta Press, 2008); Laura E. Woodworth-Ney, *Women in the American West* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2008); Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, eds., *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: Norton, 2000).

3. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

4. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 2, *Sexual Inversion*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1917), 67–68.

5. *Oakland Tribune* (California), September 3, 1915; *Evening News* (San Jose, Calif.), September 3, 1915.

6. Examples are: *Owyhee Avalanche* (Idaho), May 3, 1879; *Daily Nevada State Journal*, August 14, 1870; *Kalamazoo Gazette* (Michigan), August 11, 1880.

7. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

8. *Ibid.*, ix.

9. The Oregon Historical Society, for example, now preserves the collections of the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. A few archives dedicated to lesbian, gay, and transgender history that I have used are: the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco (www.glbthistory.org); ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles (www.onearchives.org); and the Mazer Lesbian Archives in West Hollywood, California (<http://mazerlesbian-archives.org>).

10. Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

11. Peter Boag, "Go West Young Man, Go East Young Woman: Searching for the 'Trans' in Western Gender History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 36:4 (Winter 2005): 477–97.

12. *Nebraska State Journal*, October 6, 1901.

13. For example, one can now examine transcriptions of Lobdell's commitment records to the Willard Asylum. See www.oneonta.edu/library/dailylife/family/lucytest2.html, www.oneonta.edu/library/dailylife/family/lucytest3.html, www.oneonta.edu/library/dailylife/family/lucytest4.html, and www.oneonta.edu/library/dailylife/family/lucytest5.html (each accessed March 7, 2011). Later in my research, I visited the Meeker County Historical Society in Litchfield, Minnesota, only to find out, of course, that Lobdell was well known there.

14. Examples of very useful literature that does not, however, delve into matters of sexual and gender identity are: Evelyn A. Schlatter, "Drag's a Life: Women, Gender, and Cross-Dressing in the Nineteenth-Century West," in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West*, ed. Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 334–48; DeAnne Blanton, "Cathay Williams: Black Woman Soldier, 1866–1868," *MINERVA: Quarterly Report on*

Women and the Military 10:3–4 (Fall/Winter 1992): 1–21; San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, "'She Even Chewed Tobacco': A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women in America," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian Books, 1990), 183–94; Mary Chaney Hoffman, "Whips of the Old West," *American Mercury* 84 (April 1957): 107–110; and Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Cathy Williams: From Slave to Female Buffalo Soldier* (Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 2002). One study about a western female-to-male cross dresser that makes transgender identity central to the story is Louis Sullivan's *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland* (Boston: Alyson Books, 1990).

15. These are: Evan S. Connell, *Son of the Morning Star: Custer and The Little Bighorn* (New York: North Point Press, 1984); Nora L. Whitely, "The Mysterious 'Mrs. Nash,'" *14th Annual Symposium Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association* (Hardin, Mont.: Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association, 2001), 29–44; Willah Weddon and Marion Huseas, "Shocking 'Mrs.' Nash," *True West* 31: 3 (March 1984): 19–21, 59–60; and Paul Hutton, "Noonan's Last Stand," *True West* 52:10 (November/December 2005): 118–19.

16. A few examples are: Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*, trans. John L. Vantine (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Will Roscoe, *The Zuni Man-Woman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

17. Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893*, U.S. Congress, Senate, Miscellaneous Document No. 104, 53rd Cong., 2d sess., 1894 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), 199, 227.

18. George M. Beard, *Sexual Neurasthenia (Nervous Exhaustion): Its Hygiene, Causes, Symptoms and Treatment*, edited, with notes and additions, by A. D. Rockwell, 6th ed. (New York: E. B. Treat & Company, 1905), 102–103.