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Women And The Helena Earthquakes Of 1935

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WOMEN AND THE HELENA EARTHQUAKES OF 1935

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION HONORS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

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Analysis of gender issues is one of the newer trends within the field of history. It is augmenting the traditional studies of political and diplomatic history and presenting new historians with exciting directions in which to take their research. In the fall of 2007, I had the pleasure of taking part in the first class on gender history to be taught at Carroll College. The class examined the changing roles of women in Western society since the sixteenth century. It presented a side of history that is often neglected by traditional textbooks and I was excited to attempt this approach to my own research on a topic of local interest, the 1935 Helena earthquakes.

The earthquakes have already been the subject of numerous terrific historical works, primarily the overview put together by C. R. Anderson in 1936. However, most of these examined the quakes from the perspective of political response or the experiences of the town as a whole. Little attention had been paid to the experience of women, whether in the home, school room, convent or brothel. I hope to fill in these missing areas of focus. The Montana Historical Society has done a tremendous job of collecting oral histories from the time period and those proved a rich source of material concerning the roles of women during the earthquakes.

Over the course of the past year, numerous members of the Carroll College faculty and the community of Helena have helped me with this project. I want to thank Dr. Gillian Glaes, who oversaw the project and who guided me through the challenges that arise when researching social history. I want to thank Dr. Robert Swartout for assisting me with his invaluable knowledge of the Chicago Writing Style. I also must
thank Dr. Doreen Kutufam, who took on my project in addition to her existing workload and whose assistance has been greatly appreciated.

Helena is a very history-friendly town, and that is reflected in the helpfulness of the staff at the town’s various historical archives. I want to thank the staff of the Corette Library, Sister Dolores at the Helena Diocesan archives, and Ellen Baumler and the staff at the Montana Historical Society. Without them, I wouldn’t have been able to find a starting point for this project.
INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the combination of gender history and disaster history may seem an odd coupling. However, by pairing two historical fields that seem to have little, if anything, in common, a historian can shed new light on particular aspects of the past. During disasters, women and men have often played different roles. Historically, the prevailing attitude was best illustrated by the British Royal Navies policy of rescuing “women and children first” in the event of a disaster at sea. During the Victorian period of the late nineteenth century, it was socially responsible for men to look to the protection of women and young children before their own well-being in the event of a crisis. Women were relegated to positions of being “damsels in distress,” unable to fend for themselves and having to rely on a man for defense.¹

However, the interwar period in America saw great change in the perception of women’s roles both in and out of the home. Increased social and financial independence allowed women more control over their lives.² In many common situations, women were progressively more likely to reject traditional reliance on men. After examining this trend in America’s social past, it seems likely that this period would see a breakdown in female dependence on men in disaster situations as well. This allows for a greater study of the female experience during both the natural and manmade crises of the 1920s and 1930s.

The 1935 earthquakes that struck Helena, Montana, pose a great case study to examine this theory. The series of quakes began in early October of 1935 and continued into the following spring. During this period, women were actively creating roles for themselves that were independent of those created by the community’s male population.
Women, both in the home and in the workforce, were anything but “damsels in distress.” At places such as Saint Joseph’s Orphanage, the Catholic Sisters of Charity protected their young dependents during the months of quakes and saw to the reconstruction of the orphanage after the earth had calmed. Female teachers pushed to get students back to classes, even though most of the school buildings were severely damaged. Women such as these helped reestablish a sense of order in Montana’s capital city after months of instability.

In order to understand the experiences and contributions of women during this trying time, it is important to look at conditions in and out of the home during the decade leading up to the quake. This study will examine the roles that geographic location, class, and occupation played on women’s lives in the early 1930s and what this would mean when the earthquakes struck. Brief histories on the roles of prostitutes, nurses, nuns, and homemakers in Helena will help give background to the stories of these women during the quakes.

This study will also explore the reaction of Helena’s women to the earthquakes and how those responses were both similar and different to the reaction of men. During the events themselves and in the months that followed, the two genders diverged in the ways which they handled the disaster. Women found their roles in care-taking and promoting stability within the community, while men involved themselves in rebuilding houses and businesses. In this sense, males tended to the physical reconstruction of Helena, while women looked more toward the emotional and spiritual reconstruction of the town. By studying the experiences of women during the Helena earthquakes and the
responsibilities they took on during reconstruction, one may learn more about the changing dynamics of women’s history during natural disasters.
CHAPTER 1

Women’s roles in Depression Era Helena

Lenora Jones moved to Helena, Montana from Nebraska in 1929 at the age of 53, perhaps to escape the drought and depression that had taken its toll on so many Midwestern states. She met and married her husband John and the two set up their lives at 534 1/2 Broadway Street in the heart of downtown Helena. John had worked as a carpenter in Helena but the slowdown of the 1920s had limited his ability to make money. Lenora set to work as a seamstress so that the family could pay the bills. She turned 59 years old in 1935 and, as fall set in, she developed a chronic illness. Despite her ailment, she continued working and her income helped the family make ends meet. That task became much harder when, in October of 1935, their section of town became one of the areas hardest hit by a series of earthquakes with tragic results for the Jones family.³

Barbara Holter, by contrast, entered the 1930s without much financial angst. The granddaughter of businessman Anton Holter, she lived in one of the town’s more expensive homes on Helena’s affluent west side and was waited on by three paid domestic workers. Eleven-year-old Barbara had the opportunity to receive private tutoring when she had trouble at school—she struggled with a form of dyslexia. Her older sister Margaret had a private nurse in October of 1935 when she had her appendix removed. Both examples demonstrate that the Holter family had expendable income during the 1930s. When the earthquake struck, Barbara’s home and way of life were left almost untouched.⁴
Individuals perceive events in different contexts based upon the environment in which they live. When the earth beneath Helena began to move, the response of women such as the Jones or the Holter sisters would be very different from, say, the ladies of San Francisco, California, during the quake there in 1906. Because of this, it is impossible for the reader to fully comprehend the differing experiences of women during the Helena earthquakes without a basic understanding of the situations in which they found themselves in the years leading up to the event.

Examining a demographic as diverse as women within a community can be challenging. Certainly not all women in Helena shared the same lifestyles and experiences. However, by looking at examples of women from across the geographical and socio-economic divide in Helena, certain broad themes emerge. One can then use these themes to construct an image of what life was like for various groups within Helena’s female population in the early years of the 1930s.

One of the most significant themes of the period was the increasing opportunities of women in the workforce. Among the prominent employers of women in Helena were the local schools, hospitals, and most notoriously, the local red light district. This represented one part of a national trend that saw an increasing number of women seek employment outside the home. Part of this was from necessity; in the post-war years, families were consuming more goods than ever before in the nation’s history. This encouraged families to extend themselves beyond their financial means. Often women had to enter the workforce to provide the extra income needed by their families. As a result of this development, twelve percent of American women were employed outside the home by 1930. 5
Teaching was one popular career choice for young American women and this trend was reflected in Helena. For example, at Intermountain Union College, one of the two religious colleges existing in Helena during the time, nearly half of the school’s faculty was female. This ratio held steady through the late 1920s and into the early 1930s. Although the numerical divide was roughly even, there was a strict divide when it came to which gender taught which course. Math, science, and history classes all had male instructors. Women, on the other hand, headed classes in languages, English, and music.6

1935 was a good year for female teachers and students in Helena. On September 3, 1935, the town opened the doors of the newly constructed Helena High School. At the intersection of Helena Avenue and Rodney Street, the new high school was a marvel of modern education. The building cost $474,000 and had the most up-to-date facilities available. For the town’s young women, it boasted excellent home economics classes. Sewing, Cooking and homemaking courses were stressed for the girls of the school.7 The new high school promised to give all young people in Helena the best education available.

In addition to the public education system, women in Helena also had ample opportunity to pursue higher education. As mentioned earlier, Intermountain Union College was employing large numbers of women. Its student body also was made up of a large percentage of females. Through the late 1920s and early 1930s, women made up at least half of the student body at the school. This figure peaked in 1929, a year in which the graduating class saw women make up three fourths of its membership. Eighteen out of twenty-four students in that class were female.
Women also made up the governing bodies of many of the school’s clubs and organizations. In the early thirties, music, drama, and domestic skills all were predominantly female. The yearbook organization through these years was entirely female. The Prickley Pear, the annual which the club created, reads almost like a diary. Each issue contains a day-by-day calendar relating the events of that day. For example, on March 23, 1934, it reads “Helen Trumball realizes she must graduate in the spring so she starts going to chapel.” On January 10, 1932, “Just another Sunday. Not even a good fight. Oh well, Tucker and Raitt, of course. But that’s so-o old.” This leaves an intimate account of life for the women of Intermountain Union College. The days of boredom would not extend into October of 1935, when the quake would devastate the school and the lives of its students.

Education for women was also a priority for the Sisters of Charity. A Catholic organization based in Leavenworth, Kansas, the Sisters of Charity began operating in Helena in 1869, when they opened Saints Vincent’s Academy for girls in an area of town known as Catholic Hill. From this location, the Sisters ran the first boarding school in the Montana territory. As their presence in the state grew, the Sisters opened up two other charitable organizations. The first, Saint John’s Hospital, was located on Catholic Hill near the boarding school, and tended to the medical needs of the growing mining town. By the 1930s, Saint John’s Hospital had grown into one of the two largest medical facilities in Helena and thousands of patients per year were experiencing the Sisters’ healing touch.

The second addition to the Sisters’ network was the construction of Saint Joseph’s Orphanage on the outskirts of town (what is now the intersection of Montana Avenue and
Custer Avenue.) In this three-story building, the Sisters cared for as many as two hundred orphans from around the state. The orphanage, hospital, and academy would all suffer the devastating wrath of the 1935 earthquake. Yet the Sisters of Charity would provide an example of the resilience of Helena’s women.

Despite the increased intermingling of men and women in education, the gender mixture did not extend into the workplace. Most occupations in Helena remained divided along strict gender lines. If they worked outside the home, society regulated the type of job a woman could hold. The “help wanted” section of the newspapers in the 1930s still carried separate sections for men and women. For example, traditional domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, or taking care of children dominated the female ads, while occupations requiring manual labor were more prevalent among the male-oriented ads.

One area of the labor force in which women cornered the market was the town’s red light district. Brothels had been a prominent feature of Helena’s urban landscape since the discovery of gold in 1963. In fact, by 1900 prostitution was the largest single source of female employment in Helena outside the home. Centered around Joliet and Wood Streets downtown, the sex trade continued to thrive until the entry of the United States into the First World War in 1917.

Montana greeted the outbreak of war with an eruption of ultra-nationalism. Hate-crimes targeting German immigrants soared and the state became one of the first to pass a sedition act limiting the right of individuals to criticize the government. Additional legislation targeted urban brothels. Officials believed prostitutes were responsible for the spread of venereal disease and thereby weakened both the physical and moral well being
of young Montanans heading off to war.¹³ As a result, the Red light district in Helena was closed down. In order to survive the war and subsequent prohibition of alcoholic beverages, the community's brothels, and those who worked as prostitutes, would have to adapt to the new social environment.

Ida Levy became the saving grace of the Helena red light district. Also referred to as “Jew Ida,” Levy moved from New York City to Helena shortly before the onset of the First World War. As mentioned earlier, Joliet and Wood Streets had been the center of red light activity. That particular area of Helena was run-down and located next to the various ethnic neighborhoods of town. Levy, along with her partner, Pearl Maxwell, reopened a series of brothels along the southern end of South Main Street (now Last Chance Gulch), which was a much more affluent and visible neighborhood.¹⁴ Levy walked a fine line between the legal practices of legitimate business and the now-illegal acts that had formerly dominated the industry. She transformed her establishments, appealing more to middle-class respectability. As historian Ellen Baumler described, "Speakeasies replaced saloons; brothels shut down and re-emerged in other locations as 'furnished rooms.'”¹⁵

The 1930s saw a continuation in the trend toward more profitable brothels in Helena. The influx of income associated with New Deal money allowed Mrs. Levy’s male clients more expendable cash. Young men working for the Civilian Conservation Corp—which put high school and college-age boys to work fixing trails and doing other backcountry work—were frequent visitors to Levy’s establishments. In addition, the repeal of prohibition in 1933 allowed her to openly sell alcoholic beverages once more,
making her “furnished rooms” more appealing. Such establishments made up a shadier side of female employment in Montana’s capital city.

In addition to women’s increasing presence in the workforce and classrooms, another theme can be seen in the importance of mass culture in establishing a feeling of unity among the women of Helena. In particular, the two community newspapers acted as a agent of cohesion, connecting women of different socio-economic classes. Both papers, the Helena Independent and the Record Herald, carried weekly sections dedicated solely to the interests of local women. Consisting mostly of recipes and decorating tips, these pages also contained articles on prominent female leaders (both national and local), news regarding social movements generally associated with women such as pacifism and vegetarianism, and columns on maintaining one’s appearance. For example, one article, titled “Smoke Alfalfa, Stay Slim,” linked the “good old-fashioned smoking habit” with a woman’s ability to maintain a well-shaped figure. The weekly pages overall served the purposes of both educating and entertaining the women of Helena.

The “Women’s Interest” section of the Helena Independent in 1935 carried a story of a New York vegetarian who—to prove her theory that the healthy benefits of a no-meat diet could reduce all ailments to the strength of a common cold—was allowing several rattlesnakes to bite her. The paper carried no follow-up report on her success but this remains a good example of the willingness of American women to invest themselves into a cause in which they strongly believed.

In 1935, the Helena Independent began running a daily serial called Sun-Tan. The segment, which read much like a standard romance, featured Jo Darien, a young and
attractive woman who must sort her way through a series of eligible bachelors. The strip also represented the steps that women were taking into the professional world during the inter-war period. Jo was not just a domestic housewife, but rather a university student, actively pursuing a journalism degree. This character symbolized the growing presence, mentioned earlier, of women in the workforce during the years of the Great Depression. During the earthquakes, the local newspapers would appeal to their readers to stay calm and maintain order. The dependability of the papers would help get Helena through the greatest crisis in its history.

In the 1930s, women in Helena found entertainment in many of the same venues as women across the nation. Cinema was a popular pastime. Helena offered three theaters, the most popular being the Marlow, which sat atop the present-day intersection of Broadway and Park Avenue. Hollywood understood the profits that could be made by marketing films to women. Many theaters, including the Marlow, offered "women’s matinees." These showings, which played during the afternoon, attracted women of all ages to movies such as *Becky Sharp*, which opened in 1935 as the first film fully in Technicolor.

Another broad theme during the period was the uneven impact that the Great Depression had on the women of Helena. The Great Depression began, on a national level, with the Stock Market crash in October of 1929. However, in Montana, a period of severe economic recession had been occurring since the end of the First World War. Drought had taken its toll on the farming communities of eastern Montana. In fact, during the 1920s, Montana was the only state in the union to lose population. By the time that the nationwide depression struck, the treasure state was in an extremely
vulnerable position. Montana communities such as Great Falls, Missoula, and Butte, which heavily relied on extraction and refining of natural resources—all of which were subject to the “invisible hand” of a free market economy—were hard hit by the economic downturn.22

Contrary to this situation, the economy of Helena went without many of the negative effects that the Depression had on other communities nationwide. In his thesis discussing the impact of the Great Depression on Helena, Edward Bell cites the presence of four “distinct branches of government” within the community as the main reason Helena survived the period as well as it did. The presence of municipal, county, state, and federal government employed a steady stream of workers. Even in the dark days of 1932, Helena applied for the second lowest sum of funds through the Public Works Administration (an organization that put the unemployed to work on municipal improvements) among the various urban areas in the state.23 The town even had the funds to construct the state-of-the-art Helena High School that was mentioned earlier in the paper.

The only segment of the economy to suffer many negative effects from the Depression was the construction industry. This slowdown affected John Jones, putting him out of work and forcing Lenora to increase her workload. The problem also created a housing shortage within Helena that would become a major issue during the coming earthquakes.24

Overall, the women of Helena had more disposable income than the ladies of Montana’s other communities. Contrary to usual Great Depression scenarios, retail opportunities actually increased in Helena during the 1930s. In early 1935 for example,
one of the largest department stores in town, J. C. Pennys, underwent a major renovation which increased both its size and its available merchandise. The store located at 306 North Main Street—just a few blocks from Mrs. Levy's house of ill repute—offered the women of Helena greater diversity in their shopping and demonstrates that the community maintained a fairly strong economic outlook during the period of the Great Depression.

Despite being less affected than other women by the national economic downturn, women in Helena still had to deal with elements of the Great Depression. In the 1930s Helena was economically divided between the affluent west side, and the lower income neighborhoods on the east side. Details from census records indicate that home values in the city's west end were significantly higher than those elsewhere in town. The Holter home, for example, where Barbara resided, was appraised in 1930 at forty thousand dollars. By contrast, the home of Lenora Jones appraised at just over three hundred and fifty dollars, an average price for her area of town. For those on the east end of town, the Great Depression was a more dangerous threat. This would be significant as the earthquake would cause much greater damage to this area of town, affecting the citizens that could afford it the least.

In the years and months leading up to the earthquakes, women in Helena were living life as best they could. Reflecting national trends, they were entering the workforce and academia in high numbers. Armed with educations and jobs, they were able to provide for their families. At home, they were enjoying the mass culture of newspapers and film. Unlike many women in other parts of the nation, they were not as
negatively affected by the Great Depression. However, socio-economic variations did occur throughout Montana’s capital city and those would be heightened during the coming quakes.
Figure 1. Saint Joseph’s Orphanage. This building was first occupied in October 1893. The Third Floor was removed after the 1935 Earthquake. Photo courtesy of the Helena Diocesan Archives, Helena, MT.
Figure 2. The New Helena High School on completion in 1935. The school would be hard hit by the coming earthquakes. Photo courtesy of the Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena, Montana.
CHAPTER 2
Experiences of Women During the Earthquakes

Much had occurred on in the world on October 3, 1935. In Africa, Ethiopian forces were caught in a doomed struggle to save their nation from a massive Italian invasion that began the previous day. France and Britain, concerned about the outbreak of the conflict, eyed Italy and its ally, Nazi Germany, with increasing suspicion. In the United States, the Detroit Tigers had bested the Chicago Cubs in game three of the baseball World Series, taking a 3-1 lead over the team from the Windy City.27

With all this occurring, it was easy for a reader of the Helena Independent on the morning of October 4 to miss a small column in the upper left corner. No longer than a few paragraphs, the plain headline read, “Sharp Earthquake is felt in Helena at 7:47 Last Eve.”28 It seemed an insignificant story on a page otherwise strewn with big, bold headlines. And to most Helena residents, the earthquake of October 3 was insignificant; few even noticed it. However, it was the first in the most severe series of quakes the community had ever experienced. Seismologists recorded more than 1,200 earthquakes of varying intensities between October and December of 1935.29 Viewing these events through the experiences of women in Helena provides insight into the effect of the earthquakes on Helena as a whole as well as the changing roles of women in disaster situations.

In the days after October 3, thoughts of a trembling earth escaped the minds of most Helena residents. None of the minor quakes that followed were discernable to people on the surface and no mention of anything unusual appeared in the local papers. That changed just before 1:00 A.M. on the morning on October 12. At that time, an
earthquake much stronger than any previous one struck the town. This time, the quake was felt by most residents. Lasting for several seconds, the quake shook items off shelves and cracked the plaster walls of a few homes.\textsuperscript{30} Being early on a Saturday morning, the many bars and establishments downtown, including Ida Levy’s “furnished rooms,” were packed with customers. When the shaking started, most ran for the doors, exiting the trembling buildings into the presumed safety of the streets. Women from the Placer Hotel, just a block away from Levy’s establishment, rushed into the street wearing “barely enough apparel to appear in public.” One woman was spotted pushing a naked baby in a carriage down South Main Street.\textsuperscript{31}

Like many residents, the students at Intermountain Union College were jostled out of a sound sleep. According to an account published in the \textit{Helena Independent}, one student who awoke to the quake “sat up in his bed and said: ‘I think I felt an earthquake.’ His room-mate, whose bed was scooted out into the middle of the floor, replied: ‘Yeah, I think there’s one under my bed too’.”\textsuperscript{32} The girls in the female dormitory immediately evacuated the building and tried to avoid the bricks of a collapsing chimney. They remained outside until a fall rainstorm forced them to choose dryness and warmth over the fear of another quake.\textsuperscript{33}

This behavior illustrates one of the overarching themes of the Helena earthquakes. Residents of the city, men as well as women, were unprepared for a natural disaster of that magnitude and acted in ways that contradicted typical safety behavior for such an event. Barbara Holter Kirkland later recalled, “We never had an earthquake drill in our schools, even though we lived where there were earthquakes. We never expected a big
one...so there wasn’t preparation.” This behavior of Helenans during the earthquakes continued to evolve during the course of the events.

A second theme becomes clear when one examines the damage done by the October 12 earthquake. Most of the reports of destruction were minimal, consisting mostly of collapsed chimneys and broken windows. Damage reports came in primarily from the east side, between South Main Street and the capital building, the part of town in which Lenora Jones resided. Reports were also filed from the sixth ward, the area around the Northern Pacific Depot. Experiences on the more affluent west side of town were slightly different than those on the east side. The Helena Independent indicated that the quake on the 12th and its aftershocks were felt more strongly on this side of town. Yet, no major reports of damage came from that portion of the community. This seems to indicate that the homes on the west end of Helena were sturdier in their construction, a fact which would be expected from higher income homeowners.

A sense of fear was prevalent among the residents of Helena, regardless of gender. Juanita Buck, a local housewife, was so unraveled by the quake on October 12 that she ordered her husband, Fred, to pack the family car with a bedroll, clothes, and luggage so that they could make an easy getaway if a larger quake struck. This foreboding atmosphere was augmented in the days that followed by radio reports coming from outside the city. This represents a third theme. Misinformation regarding the quakes was rampant. “Yellow press,” primarily in the form of radio personalities predicting greater chaos to come, unnerved many of the residents of Helena. Women and men both were subject to the deluge of apocalyptic warnings surrounding the fate of the town. The issue became so disconcerting that on October 15, the Helena Independent
issued a call for all subscribers to help file complaints against the offending radio personalities.\(^{38}\) Such predictions of impending doom were not in the best interest of the public and only served to increase fear.

The fear continued throughout the next week, until the 18th of the month, when it became a full panic. It was at that time that the most severe quake in the series occurred. Unlike the quake of the 12, which had occurred after midnight, this earthquake struck at 9:47 P.M. on a Friday night. The town was still very active. At Intermountain Union College, the students were celebrating their football team’s victory over their dreaded rivals at the Montana School of Mines in Butte. The school was holding a co-ed dance, in which traditional gender roles are reversed and the women were expected to ask the men and pay the entry fee. Nearly 200 students, faculty, and friends joined together for the dance in the college’s newly constructed gymnasium. As the clock neared ten o’clock the earth beneath the dancers’ feet began to roll uncontrollably. The students were horrified as the entire western wall of the new gym collapsed in a heap of rubble.\(^{39}\)

At the Marlow Theater, so popular among the women of Helena, the shaking and subsequent loss of electricity startled movie-goers into a panic. According to accounts, a few of the women present fainted. Some patrons called for the crowd to remain calm, and they slowly exited the theater. No serious injuries were reported.\(^{40}\) The same could not be said for two other individuals in town, who while fleeing from buildings, were crushed under falling rubble. Like the earlier quake, the instinct of Helena’s citizens was to flee from buildings into the open air. However, this strategy is one of the most dangerous in such a situation because it exposes the individuals to injury from falling
chimneys, plaster, and bricks. This was especially true among the taller structures of the downtown area.

The Sisters of Charity felt the full force of the quakes at all three of their locations. They rushed the children out of the buildings at both Saint Vincent’s and Saint Joseph’s. In the case of the orphanage, the nuns and children sought refuge in a nearby barn for the next three days. At Saint John’s hospital, the nurses continued to see to the safety of patients even as the earth shook beneath them. According to one account, “The Sisters went about from patient to patient crawling over heaps of plaster to enter rooms and wards, determined to offer comfort and quell fear.”

Fred Buck, who rushed home to his family after a long night at the office, provided one of the more vivid descriptions of the scene in downtown Helena. “The pavements were strewn with bricks and lumber; people were running as though they were insane; women were screaming as though in death; the streets were alive with cars; and the weird yellow cast of headlights piercing the thick blanket of dust was uncanny.”

In many cases, both the male and female occupants of the household were home when the quake hit, but certain examples demonstrate how women handled the situation in the absence of their husbands. Barbara Holter Kirkland remembered being startled by the earthquake as a young girl. She had snuck into the bathroom of their west side mansion reading a comic book, and felt that the quake must have been divine retribution for her being up so far past her bedtime. She called for her mother who rushed her out of their home. Her father had been downtown, playing cards at the Montana Club, leaving Barbara, her mother, and their maid at home. Her mother expressed the need to gather
the family in one spot and seemed torn between staying with the family home and going downtown in search of Barbara’s father.43

Soon, the family was concerned by the smell of gas coming from the home. Barbara recalled her mother reentering the home, lit cigarette in hand, to check on the possibility of a leak. Such lapses in common sense can be a result of the shaky nerves following a natural disaster. In this case, thankfully, the source was only sewer gas coming from the plumbing fixtures.44

The Holters’ fear of a gas leak was shared by many Helena residents during the earthquake. Many recalled the San Francisco quake and the subsequent fire that claimed most of that city. However, no serious gas mains were ruptured. Many families were able to turn off the gas to their homes, and the Montana Power Company quickly sent out servicemen to aid those who could not.45 Helena would not be plagued by fires in the same way that San Francisco had thirty years before.

Electricity had gone out during the quake and was down for about an hour. The city of Helena was illuminated by the glow of flashlights, car headlights, and bonfires set to warm the crowds gathering in the town’s open spaces.46 When the power did return, it found many of Helena’s residents packing their belongings into their vehicles and leaving town. Residents began fleeing the capital city en masse. At one of the local gas stations, two air-operated pumps kept gasoline flowing though the night. When the owner calculated the day’s sales, he found he sold 6,000 gallons more than during the best tourist month of the year.47

Citizens sought refuge anywhere they could find room. The housing shortage in Helena, as a result of the Depressions, insured that it was hard to come by shelter in the
The Buck family accepted shelter with one of Fred’s coworkers, Norman Benson. The four members of the Buck clan squeezed into a small two-bedroom house, already occupied by the Benson couple and their three children. Such cramped situations were common. Closer to downtown, reports came in of a one-car garage that served as a temporary shelter to nineteen people. Neighboring towns also offered to help. The community of Townsend, for example, opened most of its churches and civic halls to refugees from Helena.

The weather had been mild for October and quite a few residents sought to remain in Helena in tents and other light shelters, until they could safely return to their homes. Nearly every open space—parks, parking lots, front yards—were occupied with earthquake refugees. The National Guard set up a large refugee camp west of town, near Ft. Harrison. Named “Camp Cooney” after sitting Montana Governor Frank Cooney, this tent city was filled by citizens too afraid to return to their homes in town.

Conditions in Camp Cooney were primitive. For citizens, especially women and children, being exposed to the elements at the camp was not much better than taking their chances back in town. The elderly Lenora Jones, for example, who had been ill in the months leading up to the quake, had to be removed from the home she and John shared on Broadway. The structure had been severely damaged and the couple was moved to Camp Cooney to await the repairs. There her condition worsened as a result of both exposure and shock. She was moved again to St. Peter’s Hospital, where she died on the 28th. Cases like Mrs. Jones, who was not a direct casualty of the earthquake, illustrate the dangers present in any relief effort following a natural disaster.
The situation in Helena after October 18 could have been catastrophic. Fear permeated all aspects of life and many of the town’s east-side homes suffered some level of damage. However, several organizations came together to help keep life moving around the capital city. Women played an important role in keeping up morale in the city. For example, the switchboard operators of the Mountain States Telephone Co (a forerunner to modern-day Qwest), kept phone traffic moving in and out of the town. Those women not on shift after the quake rushed back to work, and soon all fifty-five female staff members were transferring calls in what became the busiest day in company history. In addition, operators were called in from Great Falls, Bozeman, and Livingston. They helped restore confidence by allowing the citizens in Helena to remain in contact with the outside world.\textsuperscript{53}

The Women of Ida Levy’s furnished rooms were temporarily out of business after the quake. The city quickly passed an ordinance banning public gatherings downtown. All saloons, gambling halls, and brothels were closed down until city engineers could declare the downtown area safe. National Guard troops were brought in to ensure this law was followed.\textsuperscript{54}

The quakes continued to eat at the nerves of Helenans for the next week. The Sisters of Charity tried to postpone all operations at Saint John’s Hospital until the earth settled, but some procedures just could not wait. On October 19, an emergency appendectomy occurred. Despite the continuing tremors, the doctor saw to the procedure, while one Sister acted as anesthesiologist, another as an assistant to the doctor, and a third, Mary Damian, stood in the corner continuously sprinkling the room and its occupants with holy water.\textsuperscript{55}
Citizens of the Helena Valley must have felt overwhelming relief when they read the headlines of the *Helena Independent* on October 22. “So the People May Know: Force of the Earthquake Spent!” Quoting the opinions of “leading geologists”, the article went on to state, “another major earthquake seems very improbable.” With that reassurance in mind, Helenans set to work rebuilding the neighborhoods destroyed by the quake. At Intermountain Union College, both students and staff choose to remain at their Helena campus instead of taking offers to resume classes at schools in either Butte or Bozeman. They attended courses in nearby residences and, in their spare time, helped remove rubble from the dormitories and the gym. In addition, crews of chimney-builders and brick-masons came from Great Falls and Butte to help begin the process of repairing damaged homes. Officials lifted the ban on public gatherings and reopened the downtown business district but were still worried about the possibility of increased damage, even asking Helena’s children to “forego Halloween” in an effort to prevent further vandalism.

Youngsters may not have played any tricks on the town that Halloween, but Mother Nature had one last surprise in store. In the last week of October, the warm fall weather gave way to a frigid cold front. In addition, on the afternoon of October 31, the third major quake rattled the town. While less intense than that of October 18, the Halloween quake did significantly more damage to buildings weakened by the previous tremors. Because of the timing of the earthquake, many people were caught in the downtown business district. However, after weeks of continuous tremors, citizens had become much more earthquake-savvy than they had been during the October 12 or October 18 quakes. Most huddled down inside the buildings, and few rushed out into the
street where debris was free-falling from the larger buildings. Two construction workers were killed when the scaffolding they were working on collapsed, but few other injuries were reported.

The hard work of the students at Intermountain Union College was in vain. All progress they made in the cleanup after the Oct 18 quake was erased by the earthquake on Halloween. On the first of November, busses arrived to take the students and faculty to temporary lodging in Great Falls while they waited to find out the fate of their Helena school.

The students of Helena High also waited on news of their school’s fate. They had occupied their brand-new building for just over a month. The quake on October 18 had caused severe structural damage, but the one on Halloween caused much of the south wing to collapse. The state-of-the-art laboratories and home economic rooms were destroyed.

For the Sisters of Charity, the October 31 quakes were catastrophic. Classes had resumed the day before at Saint Vincent’s, but when the Halloween quake occurred students were dismissed and the girls were sent home. With that action, Saint Vincent’s ceased to act as a boarding school. Nearby, it was clear to all onlookers that Saint John’s was also in a perilous situation. The nuns and passers-by set to work and by 5:30, all patients had been evacuated to nearby homes. Finally, at Saint Joseph’s, the children were once again evacuated to the safety of the neighboring barn. The bitterly cold weather forced them to abandon their temporary shelter for the warmth of boxcars donated by both the Great Northern Railroad and the Northern Pacific Railroad to house

refugees. There the Sisters and the young children pondered what would become of them and whether or not, the orphanage could be salvaged.  

The earthquake on October 31 damaged even more residences within Helena, adding to the already severe housing crisis. The cold weather ensured that residents would not be able to live in tents as they had done earlier. Fear and cold fueled a mass exodus from Helena’s city limits. More so than the earlier quakes, the earthquake on Halloween caused residents to seek shelter in other communities. In early November for example, the Holter girls were flown to Salt Lake City to stay with a relative. Juanita Buck and her family drove to Great Falls, where they were turned away from numerous hotels already filled with refugees before finally finding one with a vacancy. The city of Helena now waited to see what form its reconstruction would take.
Figure 3 and 4. Damage to Residential structures as a result of the October 18, 1935 Earthquake. Photos Courtesy of the Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena, MT.
Figure 5. Sisters of Charity and Orphans sleeping in a nearby barn after the quakes force them to evacuate Saint Joseph’s Orphanage. Photo Courtesy of the Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena, MT.
Figures 6 and 7. After the quake damaged their homes, many residents sought shelter in tents in open areas (above). The National Guard created a large tent city named Camp Cooney west of town to house refugees (below). Photos courtesy of the Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena, MT.
CHAPTER 3
Women and Reconstruction

The earth beneath Helena continued to move for the next several months. Exactly when the series of quakes ended is open to conjecture, but most witnesses seem to agree that by spring of 1936, the ground had finally settled. As the danger began to subside, the refugees began making their way back into Helena. On December 6, 1935, the Buck family finally returned to Helena. The Holter girls returned from Salt Lake City a few weeks later.65

The returning refugees found themselves returning to a town almost unrecognizable from the Helena that had existed the previous summer. The clock towers on both the Great Northern train depot and the Lewis and Clark County courthouse—both had been prominent features of the Helena skyline—were gone. Smokestacks and tall chimneys, once common architectural features, had disappeared as well. Structural damage throughout Helena’s east-end was high, and observers would be hard-pressed to find a single city block that escaped without harm of one form or another.66

As mentioned earlier, the slowdown in the construction industry had led to a scarcity of housing in the city of Helena. This need for lodging became more dire after the earthquakes damaged many of the existing homes. At the same time, the owners of the large Victorian homes, constructed during the booming days of gold mining in Helena, had been fighting rising heating and maintenance costs for much of the 1930s. Many of these were located on Helena’s west side, which had suffered relatively little damage during the quakes. In response to the quakes, homeowners began subdividing
these large residences in order to meet the exploding housing demand and earn a quick profit. Pat Bik, writing for the Helena Independent Record sixty years later, captured the mood of the time. “By the hundreds, single family houses divided into apartments; duplexes transformed into four-plexes; and carriage houses became rental units.”

Citizens placed great emphasis on getting the town back on its feet and reestablishing the basic flow of life. The newspapers, for example, encouraged their readers that to help rebuild their community, residents must promptly pay their bills. Women played a key role in helping Helena achieve stability. Housewives maintained their homes and volunteered for local relief groups. The nurses of Saint Peter’s Hospital continued to serve the community, taking on the patients of Saint John’s, and provide assurance that the town would retain its medical services.

The Sisters of Charity found all three of their establishments to be in dire straights. Saint Vincent’s Academy which housed the nuns in addition to acting as the school building was uninhabitable. The female students had been sent home after the Halloween earthquake yet the Sisters now had no place to live. Joseph Gilmore, the fifth Bishop of Helena, offered his mansion on the prosperous west side of Helena. For months, nearly twenty Sisters of Charity called this mansion home. The school on Catholic Hill would not reopen its doors. The Diocese of Helena completed construction of its own parochial school located near Saint Helena’s Cathedral soon after the earthquakes, and this new school served the students that had traditionally been instructed by the Sisters of Charity.

Saint John’s Hospital was also too damaged to save. The patients had been moved to neighboring homes, and those with continued need for medical attention were
soon transferred to the much less-damaged Saint Peter’s Hospital. The damage to Saint
John’s was too great for the Sisters of Charity to repair and the structure was razed. For
the next several years, the Sisters ran a persistent campaign to raise funds for construction
of a new hospital. Many of the female-run civic organizations in town held fund raisers
and benefits for the Hospital. Women in Helena saw the reconstruction of Saint John’s
Hospital as a cause they could rally behind in the aftermath of the Helena Earthquakes.
In 1939, the Sisters of Charity were finally able to rebuild their hospital on the site of the
former Saint Vincent’s Academy. This assured that they would be able to serve the
community for decades to come. 72

Finally, the future of Saint Joseph’s Orphanage was also in doubt. The Sisters
and children could not return to their home but the rail cars proved an uncomfortable
shelter for the group. On November 3, help came from Montana Senator James Murray,
who closed the resort he owned at Boulder Hot Springs and offered it to the Sisters. The
nuns operated there for the next six months while repairs were made to the orphanage. It
was found that the building was structurally secure, but the entire third floor needed to be
removed. In the spring of 1936, the Sisters of Charity returned to Saint Joseph’s
Orphanage, but the building’s capacity was significantly reduced. In 1935 it could hold
two hundred children. By the end of reconstruction, that number had been lowered to
eighty-five orphans. 73

Throughout the period of reconstruction, the Sisters of Charity were working
throughout the community. They were assisting in relief organizations and taking care of
the newly-homeless. The Sisters saw to the needs of the less fortunate, even when their
own situation was bleak. This work helped soothe the emotional pain that the town was
experiencing in the aftermath of the earthquakes. The Sisters of Charity, in this way, played a huge role in reconstructing the spiritual and emotional landscape of Montana’s capital city.

In their own manner, even the working girls of Ida Levy’s furnished rooms helped promote stability in Helena. No damage was reported to the establishment at 19½ South Main Street and as soon as the city lifted its ban on public gatherings downtown, the enterprise reopened. Business boomed in the immediate post-quake days as the furnished rooms benefited from the increase in reconstruction workers in town from Butte, Great Falls, and Bozeman. The fact that the earthquakes did not alter the brothels of town was important in achieving a certain peace of mind that life in Helena would go on as it always had.

Female teachers also were essential in getting students back to school. They often took a lead role in bringing education to the children whose schools were too damaged to return. Fannie Reynolds, for example, opened a small school for neighborhood children in her west-side home. There, she tutored roughly a dozen elementary school students—one of whom was Barbara Holter Kirkland—in reading and math. Independent activities, like those of Mrs. Reynolds, helped maintain stability in the lives of the students during this time, at least until the school district could come up with a way to get them back in public school.

The education system in Helena was especially hard hit. The school district found the new high school building completely uninhabitable in the wake of the October 31 earthquake. The damage to the building was assessed at $360,000, over seventy-five percent of what construction had originally cost.
The students, both male and female, of Helena High School seemed to be in a precarious situation. The public school system had suffered so much damage to its existing buildings that it was unable to house all the students that needed instruction. The school board considered many options for overcoming this problem. Some suggested sending half of the community’s children to school in the morning and the other half in the evening. The solution finally came in the form of a generous offer by the rail companies.

As mentioned earlier, the Great Northern Railway and the Northern Pacific Railway had both loaned boxcars for use as temporary shelters after the October earthquakes. By early December, the need for temporary housing had lessened and the railroad companies offered the use of the cars to the school district. On December 16, Helena High School students began classes in what would be called their "school on wheels." For the next two years, while the battle raged over reconstruction funds for the high school, the men and women of Helena High attended classes, participated in yearbook, and performed plays from the discomfort of railway boxcars.

Damage at Intermountain Union College came in at over $100,000. Despite the best wishes of both students and staff, the Fighting Panthers of I.U.C. would not return to Helena. They finished the academic year in Great Falls and the next year merged with Billings Polytechnic Institute and formed Rocky Mountain College. The loss of Intermountain Union left women in Helena without any option to pursue advanced education locally. The other institute of higher learning in town, Carroll College, was closed to women until the opening of its nursing program over a decade later.
Perhaps the most telling indication of the emotional toll taken on the students of Helena can be found in the 1936 edition of The Vigilante, the school’s yearbook. Previous editions had contained messages from the senior class president that were full of hopeful language, stressing the bright future that lay ahead for the graduating class. In 1936, however, the message had a much less optimistic tone. Jim Cummings, class president, wrote: “The years of dependence and security are about over. Before us lies a future as uncertain and indistinct as the light of the farthest star.” The students had undergone a process they called “quakation” and had reemerged stronger, but less naïve about the future.

Quakation may have been the greatest legacy of the earthquakes on Helena. Most of those that wrote about their experiences during the quakes detailed a change in attitudes among residents of the capitol city. Helena, the community that received the second lowest allocation of WPA funds in the state, now found having to ask for over $150,000 in funds from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Before October of 1935, most Helena residents viewed the hardships of the Great Depression as something that was happening “out there.” The earthquakes brought the suffering and uncertainty into the city limits. It reminded citizens that the future was very uncertain.

Yet even as Helenans became less confident in the stability of their own lives, they became more secure in their relationships with the rest of the community. The earthquakes initiated one of the most significant periods of community cooperation that Helena has ever witnessed. Women played a crucial role in this. They opened their homes to refugees who had nowhere else to go. Quarters were cramped for months after the quakes, but it fostered a feeling of overall goodwill among residents that spilled over
into other areas. The Episcopals opened their church on Eleventh Avenue to Methodists whose own house of worship was damaged. Carroll College offered use of its building to the Sisters of Charity for use as a temporary hospital. The Salvation Army and Red Cross continued to provide assistance despite waning funds through the December holiday season. The community of Helena came together as it had never done before.

A spirit of resilience began to seep into the consciousness of residents.

On October 24 a drawing by John Powers of Butte appeared on the front page of the *Helena Independent*. It featured a man standing above the ruined buildings of Helena. The man was portrayed carrying a saw and hammer and was labeled, "The Dauntless Spirit of Last Chance Gulch." The caption of the drawing reads, "We will rebuild." In the days following the quakes, this image became an unofficial representation of the hardiness of Helenans in the wake of disaster. It fostered a strong relationship between the current generation and those that survived disasters in the past—most notably the fire on Last Chance Gulch in 1874, which destroyed most of the town's businesses and 150 homes.

Within a year most of the damage done to Helena had been repaired. Miraculously, the town suffered no long-term population loss because of the quakes. Within a few months, nearly everyone had returned. The spirit of unity that developed lasted much longer. Helenans also learned the importance of earthquake preparation. Four individuals lost their lives as an immediate result of the shaking earth. More died of shock and exposure in the days after. Yet Helena had been lucky. The timing of the earthquakes had prevented more people from being downtown among the taller structures or in the schools that collapsed. After 1935, buildings in Helena were constructed
according to a stricter code. Tall chimneys, brick veneers, and large clock towers disappeared for a while from Helena architecture.87

Examining the reconstruction of Helena brings up the question of women’s changing roles during times of disaster. As mentioned in the introduction, women were traditionally portrayed in passive roles during crises, and needed the protection of men. In the Helena example of the 1930s, however, women played a much more active role. Stories circulated which demonstrated the strength of Helena’s women during this trying time. Cora McLaughlin provides a fine example. McLaughlin was the female business manager of the *Helena Record-Herald*, the evening newspaper in town. The newspaper staff fled from their downtown posts after the earthquake of October 31. Cora and two others were the only employees who remained in the office when the quake subsided. Determined not to let a natural disaster stop the presses, McLaughlin got on the phones, calling employees and bringing them back to work. Her dedication ensured that the evening newspaper, the lifeline of Helena’s citizens to information about what was occurring, went out on time.88

It seems that from the time the earth stopped shaking, women were working to rebuild the town that they called home. While not directly rebuilding damaged structures, they saw to other aspects of reconstruction. The Sisters of Charity continued tending to the poor and infirm, despite the absence of their hospital and school. Housewives saw to the well being of their families. Educators ensured that the town’s children would return to school to receive a quality education. The women of Helena’s brothels went back to providing for the physical needs of the town’s men. As has been
demonstrated, women were very active during reconstruction and helped get Helena back on its way to being a prosperous Montana community.
Figures 8 and 9. The earthquakes leveled the south wing of the new Helena High School building (above). For the next two years the students attended classes in railway boxcars which they called the “high school on wheels” (below). Photos courtesy of the Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena, MT.
Figure 10. The Spirit of Last Chance Gulch which appeared in the *Helena Independent* and inspired the town. Sketch courtesy of the Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.
CONCLUSION

It is the job of the historian to look at trends in the past and use those to better explain why events unfolded as they did. In the case of the Helena earthquakes, it is important to examine how women behaved and how they were portrayed in order to understand the changing gender norms of the time. As can be seen by examples such as Cora McLaughlin or the switchboard operators of the Mountain States Telephone Company, the earthquakes occurred at a time when more women were in the workforce than ever before. Unlike conventional beliefs, that held that women must be passive participants in disasters, both of the above are examples of women who took active measure to control the situation around them and provide stability of service to the customer. This demonstrates that with increased social and financial independence came less of a belief that the place of women in a disaster was to rely on the protection of a man.

Yet, in some senses, the reaction of women to the earthquakes still held to traditional notions concerning gender. Women and men had very different roles in the rebuilding of Helena. Mirrored by the classified ads run in the days before the quake (see chapter 1), the reconstruction effort was strictly segregated by gender. To handle the physical reconstruction, men from the town and neighboring communities were assembled. They took the responsibility of shooting down damaged chimneys and clearing debris from the streets. Social taboos at the time prevented women from taking a large role in the physical reconstruction of Helena.
However, women found their own place in caring for the non-physical aspects of rebuilding. The nerves of many residents were almost to the breaking point after weeks of constant tremors. The exodus from Helena on October 31 is a testament to that. As citizens trickled back into town, women took a leading role in reestablishing stability for the rest of the town. McLaughlin, who ensured the stability of the daily paper, or Fannie Reynolds who kept up an educational environment despite the lack of a proper school house all added to this sense of stability. “Quakation” took its toll on Helena’s citizens and it really fell to the women to calm nerves and ensure that life in the town would continue as it always had.

The case of the 1935 Helena earthquake is important in understanding not just the history of Helena, or of Montana, but the history of gender as well. It presents a microcosm in which historians can examine the changing nature of twentieth-century women in American life. Disasters are great case studies of human behavior because they demonstrate how individuals act when the routine of daily life is disturbed. Examining women’s roles in this context can therefore give great insight into the social changes occurring in other aspects of society.

Helena’s women, from the housewives to educators, the Sisters of Charity to the women of ill repute demonstrate that women were becoming less dependent on male-dominated society. They were not “damsels in distress” during the earthquake but self-reliant individuals who acted in the manner that they thought best. This social trend would continue through the next decade, when women flocked to the factories (including the Anaconda Mining Companies refineries in East Helena) to fill the employment void left by men fighting the Second World War in Africa, Europe and the Pacific. During the
next half century women would “liberate” themselves from what they saw as male-dominated society and culture. Historians can see the early stages of this independence when they examine the earthquakes in the community of Helena, Montana.
NOTES

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62 Hilander, “Heartbreak at Helena High,” 2E.

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