

**Jessie Drake:**  
**Frontier Woman, Gibson Girl**  
by Jeff Kunkel

**Introduction**

This essay explores the frontier yearnings and travels of Jessie Drake, a pioneer girl who migrated with her family from Kansas to San Jose when California was viewed as the last of America's frontier, and as a woman, migrated with her husband to Alaska, the "New Frontier." Jessie was one of the few women among the thousands of gold miners in and around Nome, Alaska - a hundred miles from the Arctic Circle and the Siberian coast. Her story is made personal and vivid through excerpts from the letters and photographs of the McDaniel Family Collection.

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Jessie A. DRAKE 1870-1947 Bushnell Studio

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Jessie Drake first journeyed to the American frontier at the age of twelve, when she and her parents boarded a train in Troy, Kansas, and arrived in San Jose, California, on May 8, 1883 - fourteen years to the day after the golden spike had completed the Transcontinental Railroad. At that time, California was viewed as the last of America's vanishing frontier, and thousands of people - like Jessie and her family - were migrating to California to experience what remained of frontier life in America.

In San Jose, Jessie finished grammar school, clerked at her father's store, and watched the frontier vanish all around her. By 1890, over half of all Californians lived around San Francisco Bay, and the whole state was moving toward a metropolitan future. In 1893, when Jessie was 23 years old, Frederick Jackson Turner, an American historian, declared what Jessie and most Americans knew - the American frontier was gone! Frontier life - with all its optimism, peril, drive, and energy, had vanished. America, the "Frontier Nation," was now a nation without a frontier.

As Americans like Frederick Jackson Turner - and Jessie Drake - were wrestling with what the loss of the frontier meant to their lives and their nation, gold was discovered along Canada's Klondike River and at several locations in Alaska's interior in 1896, and the United States Territory of Alaska, purchased thirty years earlier from the Russians, moved to the forefront of the nation's attention. Newspapers and magazines began to refer to Alaska as "The New Frontier," reconnecting Americans to all the promises of frontier life. Jessie eagerly read all of the accounts of life on the New Frontier in the daily San Jose Mercury News. Quite unexpectedly, America's vanished frontier had reappeared in the far north!

In 1898, gold was discovered on Anvil Creek in northwest Alaska, and in 1899, a young man from the church choir at Jessie's church, Edmund McDaniel, joined the stampede to Alaska's Seward peninsula. He returned to San Jose that winter with \$200.00 in gold flakes and tales about his life on the New Frontier - just a hundred miles from the Arctic Circle and Siberia. Edmund soon discovered that Jessie Drake, a soprano in the choir, wanted to hear every tale he told about his life in Alaska. That next summer, Edmund and his brother, Wilfred, an accomplished photographer, sailed to Nome and returned to San Jose the following winter with dozens of photographs, which further invigorated Jessie's interest in Alaska and Edmund. She fell in love with both!

The courting couple began to speak about marrying and moving to the New Frontier as husband and wife. Jessie's mother approved of their marriage but so feared her daughter going to Alaska that she broke off the tradition of Sunday suppers with the McDaniel family and declared to Jessie that she would never give her blessings to the couple if they moved to Alaska. But the draw of the New Frontier was stronger than a mother's protest! On June 1st, 1904, and Edmund were married in Central Christian Church in Santa Clara, and the next morning, Jessie boarded the S.S. St. Paul in San Francisco and began her first journey to Alaska, accompanied by her groom, her groom's brother, and 450 other passengers from California and around the world, mostly men.

At the turn of the century, a sea journey from San Francisco to Nome could last up to a month and be filled with hardship - gales, seasickness, cold, ice floes, pestilence, and violence. On his first steamship trip to Nome, Wilfred wrote, "Two of our ladies, of which we have 50, got into a drunken row and thought that the other must die, pulled their guns on each other, but were separated and put in the hold of the ship." \* Most of the passengers traveled "steerage," which meant that they had a canvas cot, and, in the words of Wilfred, meals of "...Mush: very poor with lumps as big as eggs in it, boiled potatoes and fried meat and belly wash coffee." Jessie and Edmund traveled "second class", which meant that they had a

\*all quotes are from writings in the McDaniel Family Collection, currently under my curatorial care.

private cabin, bed, and dinners of roast goose and strawberries, though neither Jessie nor Edmund could eat for the first four days of their honeymoon cruise due to violent seasickness.

On June 15th, 1904 - fourteen days after the S.S. St. Paul had left San Francisco, the ship anchored off the coast of Nome. The three young Californians boarded a landing barge, and Jessie walked the streets of Nome for the first time in her life. She saw a shrinking boomtown of 7,000, which had grown from a collection of tents in 1898 to Alaska's largest city in 1900 - home to one-third of all the whites living in Alaska, with 20,000 residents, schools, churches, theatres, gambling houses, hotels, banks, restaurants, four piano movers, and a French Lingerie shop. Jessie was a minority in Nome - less than one in ten residents in that dirty, dangerous boomtown were white women. These women worked in Nome as nurses, teachers, clerks, cooks, shop-owners, newspaper reporters, and entertainers. Jessie bought wallpaper, and, Wilfred said, "the last carpet in Nome."

The McDaniel brothers took Jessie to their mining claim and cabin near Cripple River, on the tree-less tundra outside of Nome, where white women were even more scarce than in Nome. Will wrote, "From the Indian Village to Sinrok, a distance of about twenty-five miles, only two white women could previously be found...and when the news of the arrival of another white woman reached the native villages at Penny and Cripple

Rivers, Eskimo women came, as they said, "to see white 'ooman." "

Wilfred wrote, "With a lady in camp, our routine of living with the crude and primitive conditions which we content to endure will necessarily be changed." Edmund and Wilfred built another room onto their rough log cabin. Jessie wallpapered the inside walls and ceiling, sewed and hung colorful drapes and curtains, and unrolled a carpet over the sluice box slats which served as floorboards. Wilfred wrote, "Those who saw it declared it to be the most attractive cabin west of Nome!" On the living room wall, Jessie hung framed photos of her loved ones, and on her bedroom wall, she pinned cutouts of the Gibson Girl, a feminine ideal popularized in the 1890's by the American artist, Charles Gibson. His pen and ink drawings portrayed a sophisticated, intelligent woman, with high collar blouse, long skirt, tiny waist, elegant neck, and long hair pinned on top of her head. Just look at Jessie in the photographs - she was the Gibson Girl of the New Frontier!

Jessie did not mine with the brothers, but she shouldered much of the rest of the work - collecting, cooking, and preserving food; laundering; mending clothes; caring for the sled dogs; tending the fire in the cabin stove. She loved her chores, with the exception of cooking dried tomcod which she said "stunk to high heaven." In one letter, she wrote, "I put up two jars of blueberries and one of cranberries this morning, and tomorrow I will try mossberries. We have been having mossberry pie on Sundays and



Edwards Creek cabin interior, decorated by Jessie. 1906  
photo by Wilfred McDaniel Sr.



Jessie with skel dog pups at Cripple River cabin, 1905  
Photo by Wilfred McDaniel, Sr.

think them fine." On summer Sundays, Jessie would pack a picnic lunch and along with Edmund, Wilfred, and their sled dogs, would hike up nearby Mt. Rodney for a picnic and view of the Bering Sea and hills. Jessie read and re-read the books which she brought from California. She also collected and pressed wildflowers from the tundra, creating handmade books which she titled, "Wildflowers of Alaska," and sent to her loved ones in California. The one book remaining includes forty varieties of wildflowers, each delicately mounted on its own page with Jessie's handsome ink printing identifying each flower - "COTTON GRASS, BLUEBELL, MONKSHOOD, HAREBELL, AKSALA, PHLOX, CREAM CUP...."

Winter was a lonely time for Jessie. Each day, Edmund and Wilfred worked underground in tunnels dug along ancient beach lines beneath the frozen tundra. Just before facing her first winter, she wrote, "...we are looking forward to a very fierce winter so I shall be shut up alone most of the time." Jessie was happy to receive visits from Penny River native women and traded sugar and tea for ivory carvings and fur clothing. An outgoing native boy from Penny River by the name of See-a-yuk visited Jessie often, and she taught him some English phrases while he taught her some Inupiaq phrases. Once a month, Jessie and Edmund would mush their dogs to Nome for a restaurant meal, shopping, and visiting.

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On Christmas Day, 1904, Jessie decorated a small, leafless willow bush with green paper trimmings, placed it on the cabin table, and prepared her first New Frontier Christmas dinner - roasted, stuffed ptarmagin, cranberry sauce, canned sweet potatoes and corn, and homemade ice-cream. After the meal, Jessie and Edmund went ice-skating on Penny River and visited the native village at Penny River to offer gifts of sugar, coffee, and tea. Daylight on Christmas Day in Nome lasts less than four hours.

In the summer of 1905, a white woman from New York City moved to the tundra outside of Nome. Her name was Charlotte Renny, and she began work at the Sinrok Roadhouse, a two-story log hotel for travelers - ten miles from Jessie's cabin. The two women became fast friends, spending at least a day each week together and diminishing one another's isolation. Charlotte joined Jessie, Edmund, and Wilfred on picnics and wildflower-hunting excursions, and the foursome attended parties at the Roadhouse, which had a piano - perhaps the only piano between Nome and the North Pole at the time!

Each month, Jessie would receive - via steamship - a letter from her mother, who kept insisting that Jessie return to San Jose. In one letter, Jessie's mother wrote - after viewing a photograph of Jessie sent from Alaska, "You look very badly and I feel like crying to look at it...Life is too



Jessie and Lottie Reamy, wildflower hunting near Nome, AK.  
Photo by Wilfred McDonald Sr. 1906

short to spend it that way...Come soon." In September of 1906, just as Jessie was preparing for her third winter on the tundra, she received a letter from her mother, which began, "Papa is not well." Her father was not expected to live long, so Jessie and the brothers rearranged their plans. They closed up the cabin, caught the last boat out of Nome that autumn, and returned to San Jose so that Jessie could help care for her ailing father. Jessie, Edmund, and Wilfred intended to return to their cabin in spring and resume frontier life, but Jessie's father stayed ill for over a year before he died, and Jessie became pregnant with her first child. Will returned alone to Alaska, collected their goods, signed over their claim to a commercial mine, said goodbye to Charlotte, and sailed back to California.

Edmund and Jessie used some of their gold money to begin a contracting business in Santa Clara County and Jessie managed their large home in San Jose and raised their two daughters. She enjoyed gardening, embroidery, and telling her children bedtime stories about her life on the New Frontier. Jessie never returned to Alaska, but each spring for the rest of her life, her longing for Alaska returned to her and she declared to all who were listening, "It's June - time to go back to Alaska."