A PLACE FOR FEMALE CONSUMERISM:
THE MCGOVERN SISTERS’ DRY GOODS STORE,
1909-1944

by
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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Urban Affairs and Public Policy

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This thesis looks at women’s consumerism in a rural western town between 1909 and 1944 through the lens of the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store in Virginia City, Montana. To fully understand the store and its significance to the women of Madison County, the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store building and the objects within, the cultural landscape of Virginia City, historic maps and photographs, the McGovern store records, and census records are analyzed. At a time when mass consumerism was changing customer expectations, and increasing business competition, the McGovern sisters found ways to keep their business in operation. The sisters did this by combining traditional business practices, including bartering and long-term credit, with modern ones developed by department store and mail-order companies. The sisters were savvy business owners, able to find ways to reach and serve their customers, and to stay in operation despite a rapidly declining economy. The McGovern sisters and their customers needed to operate within a masculine environment, etching out their own role and space within the town, with the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods store being one of the only female centered spaces in town. The building was adapted by the sisters to create two spaces: a public commercial space that was accessible and attractive to women, and their own private residential space that displayed middle-class respectability and values. This thesis shows that interpreting women’s history should have a larger presence at
museums and historic sites in the inter-mountain west, and the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store is an ideal space in which to interpret women’s western history.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

During the early twentieth century consumerism in America was changing in a way that would redefine American culture. Throughout the United States the older agrarian culture was gradually superseded by a different culture based on mass consumption.¹ This new culture was not grounded in traditional family or community values, rather it was secular and market driven. Instead of making their own clothes, or buying them from a milliner or tailor, people now purchased readymade clothing at large department or variety stores. This change was brought about by a few large corporations who were successful in getting Americans to buy their products. These corporations created an environment for consumption that is still present in the shopping areas of today, relying on researched use of color, extensive use of glass, and bright lights. This new consumerism focused on women as the main consumers in the family; retailers sold products in places that would make women feel special. But “there were still places – rural towns, religious communities, even urban enclaves – untouched by some degree by consumer capitalist culture.”² Virginia City, Montana, was one of these places (Figure 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3). Though aspects of the wider


² Leach, Land of Desire, 12.
consumer capitalist culture influenced such places, it was not the dominant method of consumption. The owners of the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store in Virginia City adopted some of these consumer trends, but continued to use some traditional business methods, including bartering for goods and fostering personal relationships with customers (Figures 1.4 and 1.5).³

Hannah and Mary McGovern operated their store in the small mining community of Virginia City, Montana, between 1909 and 1944. Virginia City was settled in 1863 for the purpose of gold mining, swelling to a peak population of approximately 10,000 in only a few years. Virginia City was a rough and tumble western town with businesses and houses thrown up where space provided, and most items bought with gold dust. This large settlement did not last for long, and by the time the McGovern sisters’ opened their store in 1909, only 466 people lived in Virginia City. This made Virginia City a ghost town, a “community that has lost more than ninety percent of its population.”⁴ Virginia City was a town struggling to hold onto its population, as well

³ The store has been referred to by several different names, including the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store, the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store, and the Ladies Bizarre. The Ladies Bizarre was the name of the store before it was bought by the McGovern sisters, and it was referred to by this name in advertisements placed in the local newspaper by the sisters in the 1910’s. The McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods store was never used by the sisters, though it best describes what the store was. For this thesis, I have decided to use the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store as the store name, as it was the name of the store in its later years, and it is the name which was on the sign above the front door of the store.

Figure 1.1 Environmental view of the north side of Wallace and Idaho Streets, looking northeast, Virginia City, Montana. Source: Photo by David L. Ames, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
Figure 1.2 View of south (front) elevation of Kremer-McGovern-Strasburger complex, looking north, Virginia City, Montana. Source: Photo by David L. Ames, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
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as maintain a local economy. This was due to many factors, including a decline in mining, and being incredibly difficult to reach, whether by train, horse or automobile. Virginia City was not easily accessible during the early twentieth century; product shipped there came to the train station in Alder, about ten miles away, and then moved the rest of the way by wagon and later automobile.\(^5\) The McGovern sisters’ operated

their store within an economically and socially challenging environment, staying in operation for almost forty years. In 1944, Hannah McGovern passed away, and Mary closed the store and moved in with family members. Due to the preservation efforts of Charles and Sue Bovey, the store building and many of the items that the McGovern sisters’ left behind still remain intact. This combination of the intact building, business records, and objects from the store and residence of the McGovern sisters’ all within their original setting provide an opportunity to study women’s consumerism in a small, rural, western town during the early twentieth century.

Women’s consumerism in rural contexts has not been as heavily researched as consumerism in urban and suburban areas of the United States. This thesis looks at how women consumed in rural or isolated areas during the early twentieth century. The McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store in Virginia City, Montana, offers a unique opportunity to study women’s consumerism in the rural rocky mountain region during the early twentieth century. Consumerism in a western mining town during the early twentieth century was a constant conflict between traditional and modern consuming practices. The McGovern sisters and their female customers also struggled to find their place within a masculine landscape. The sisters accomplished an amazing feat by keeping their dress goods store in operation despite a declining population and economy and while living “under long-standing gender constraints imposed… by the masculine society around them.”

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Sisters’ Dry Goods Store, like department stores and other rural dress goods stores, offered a female-friendly environment, where most customers and workers were women.

Women’s Consumerism and Rural Consumerism in the Early Twentieth Century

Women and department stores were at the center of mass consumerism trends in the early twentieth century. Department stores recognized that shopping was women’s main leisure time activity and created a free entry, visually pleasing “ethos of service and value.” Though women were the main audience for this new mass consumerism, it was a specific type of woman that was targeted, namely white, American born, and middle- to upper-class. “These women were less likely to work outside their homes than American women in general and more likely to have the financial resources to lavish large sums on their houses, wardrobes, and entertainments.” They represented the American cult of domesticity, where the home was a refuge and a woman’s one and only domain.

Prior to the twentieth century, dressmaking was also a women’s domain. Women who were able to purchase their clothing as opposed to making it themselves

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would go to female dressmakers and milliners at their shops or sometimes their homes. With mass consumerism and new scientific techniques, like pattern drafting systems, women’s fashion began to be a male-dominated market. Some milliners and dressmakers were able to stay in business during this period by selling ready-made clothing and dressmaking materials, cleverly advertising themselves, “closely resembling department stores,” and opting for large corporate-like establishments instead of small intimate shops.\(^9\) Going into the twentieth century, women were still the primary producers of clothing, but now often as factory workers and saleswomen without control over their work.

Not every woman fit the idealized white middle-class American women that were targeted by department stores. American women of lower economic classes and/or ethnic and racial identities consumed differently than white middle- to upper-class women, though they did so within the mass consumerism framework. Lower income women often worked outside the home, and had little to no disposable income, but this did not stop them from purchasing. Working women bought and wore clothing to demonstrate respectability and social status, and they had access to styles similar to those worn by upper- and middle-class women, either by producing clothing themselves, or purchasing it from stores that catered to their demographic. Working women in New York City could purchase their clothing from clothing stores, who “cheaply produced the styles found in exclusive establishments.”\(^10\) Clothing was also

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a way for women to assert their individuality and independence, and sometimes working women’s styles conflicted with a ‘respectable’ status by American middle-class standards.

This new mass consumerism was not as widespread in rural and recently settled areas of America. Rural consumerism was rising in the early twentieth century, but these areas often retained traditional ways of consumerism; small business owners continued to run small shops on main streets, as opposed to city department stores run by large corporations. Rural shopping also had a leisure time function, centering on socialization where “there was always coming and going in the store, and plenty of ‘settin’ too.”11 Country stores were centers of gossip, with shoppers often having close personal connections with shop owners (Figure 1.6). Shop owners retained some traditional economic systems, allowing customers to barter goods and services for products, and maintaining long-term credit. At the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store in Virginia City, several customers had credit accounts, sometimes lasting for over a year, while others paid with goods such as wood, milk, and produce.12 Country stores began to adapt ways of display used in department stores to their own purposes, displaying their goods in an organized way that would encourage consumers to buy. Prior to the mass consumerism movement, items were purchased in bulk and customers would tell the shop owner how much they would like of an item and it

11 Laurence Ayres and Marcia Ray Johnson, Over the Counter and on the Shelf: Storekeeping in America, 1620-1920, (Rutland, Vt.: C. E. Tuttle Co, 1961), 35.

Shop owners began to recognize “that the artifact in which a product was boxed or bottled could be more appealing to the customer than the article itself”, and so they would instead purchase items in individual packaging and display them on shelves.\textsuperscript{13} Rural shop owners also sold by

\footnotesize
example, using new products within their stores, thus offering low cost marketing for wholesalers.\textsuperscript{14} Rural consumerism was changing in the early twentieth century, but at a slower rate than in urban markets, and while combining both traditional and modern business techniques.

Rural and small town business owners faced competition during the early twentieth century from mail order companies. Better mail service and free parcel delivery up to eleven pounds made ordering items by mail efficient and affordable. Catalogs from companies like Sears and Roebuck offered almost everything that a rural American family could need or want, from clothing and household items to seeds and houses. The Sears catalog became a well recognized method for purchasing items, and a staple in country households where “the ‘Farmer’s Wishbook’ doubled as a reader, a textbook, and an encyclopedia in many rural schoolhouses.”\textsuperscript{15} The success of Sears and Roebuck in the rural consumerism market created many challenges for small town and rural businesses.

American rural residents did not readily accept this new form of mass consumption as it was difficult for “people who prided themselves on being producers” and “advocates of the traditional” to become consumers.\textsuperscript{16} Rural residents were pushed and pulled towards becoming consumers by the Country Life Movement, which began around 1900 and continued into the 1940s.\textsuperscript{17} The Country Life

\textsuperscript{14} Schelereth, “Country Stores,” 352.

\textsuperscript{15} Schlereth, “Country Stores,” 365.

\textsuperscript{16} Schlereth, “Country Stores,” 375.
Movement started when many young people from the country began moving in large numbers into cities. Educators, urbanites, religious leaders, social scientists and others became concerned that “so many bright people were leaving the countryside that it would become blighted, with severe consequences for the nation.”\textsuperscript{18} Country Life reformers, with support from the American government, traveled the country educating rural people and instituting programs to modernize homes and farming, reform schools, and electrify homes, to create “better farming, better living, and better business.”\textsuperscript{19} Though these reformers were marginally successful, those successes were hard won. This was because “farm men and women employed several forms of resistance, from physically attacking a new technology (such as booby-trapping roads to prevent speeding autos from killing farm animals) to using technologies in ways not sanctioned by manufacturers (such as playing music on a telephone party line) to acts of what is usually called ‘consumer resistance’ (such as declining to buy electric ranges).”\textsuperscript{20} Despite resistance, consumerism in rural America increased in the early twentieth century, and new technologies were put to use.

Rural women were an active part of the Country Life movement as both reformers and the subject of reform. Rural women were seen as overworked and


\textsuperscript{19} Danbom, \textit{Born in the Country}, 169.

stressed, in part because they did not use new technologies and household appliances as much as they could in the home. Many of the persons working to reform through the Country Life commission, often as home demonstration agents, were women. They felt that farm women need to be educated on how to efficiently run a household using modern technology and consumer goods, making the assumption that they could obtain these goods “by exercising their womanly influence in the home.”

Though many rural women did feel overworked and would have appreciated labor saving technologies in the home, they defended their way of life, and weighed consumer goods that they purchased against both the advantages to and the costs for their families. The Country Life movement along with growing consumerism in the early twentieth century affected the lives of women in Montana, women who shopped at the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store.

The everyday life of Montana women was similar to that of rural and small town women in other parts of America. The average woman living in rural Montana in the early twentieth century had few opportunities for consumption. Most Montanans were not part of an economic scale that allowed them to buy many consumer goods. Though there were a few thriving cities in Montana like Butte, many mining communities, like Virginia City, were declining, and farming families faced hard times due to drought, agricultural depression, bank failures, and the Great Depression.

21 Kline, Consumers in the Country, 92.

22 Mary Melcher, “‘Women's Matters': Birth Control, Prenatal Care, and Childbirth in Rural Montana, 1910-1940,” Montana the Magazine of Western History, 41.2, (Spring, 1991), 49.
Though they were limited in their ability to consume, many families did devote some of their resources to acquiring goods.

First-hand accounts from Montana women in the early twentieth century demonstrate that women found ways to both buy goods and contribute to the family finances. These women often did not have the time or money to consume but sometimes when they had earned their own money or their families’ situation improved, they bought things for themselves or for the decoration of the home. Women were creative in finding ways to make extra money to add to the family finances, on top of performing their regular house work. They hired out to other farms, taught home economics courses, and produced produce, dairy items, and poultry to sell or exchange for goods in nearby towns. As a young woman, Saima Myllymaki, with earnings from working for a farmer, was able to purchase her “first boughten clothes”. Agnes Jelinek of Coffee Creek sold turkeys to purchase clothing for her children and something extra for the home after being impressed “that her sister-in-law made enough money selling turkeys to make a down payment on a first car.” Acquiring more goods in their homes was important to these women, and Montana women found creative ways to acquire them.

Women entrepreneurs in Montana were able to be successful by offering consumer goods to largely rural populations. These businesses often started in the


women’s homes, or as a part-time enterprise, and grew into larger successful businesses. Women entrepreneurs offered goods to women that were not necessities, knowing that women found spending some money on their appearance and home important. These entrepreneurs were similar to the McGovern sisters in that their businesses required them to build personal connections with their customers. Fern Harshman sold Avon products door to door in Montana, sometimes walking nine miles in between farm homes to sell her products. Montana women wanted consumer goods, and when they could not acquire them according to national trends, they did so through local business owners and personal connections.

Montana was settled by Europeans and Americans for the purpose of mining, with mining towns popping up all over the state during the middle of the nineteenth century. Some of these mining towns became large cities, like Butte and Helena, or changed into small agricultural communities, or became ghost towns, which was almost the fate of Virginia City. Though Virginia City seemed isolated, residents still were able to stay informed of the recent fashions and technology, and consumed products similar to those in less isolated areas of the United States.

**Virginia City, Montana, and the McGovern Sisters**

Virginia City, Montana, is located in the midst of the Rocky Mountain range, between the Ruby and Madison Mountains, about sixty miles from the

confluence of the Gallatin, Madison, and Jefferson rivers. The natural boundaries of this region made it an important hunting and gathering region for many Native American groups including the Shoshone, Crow, Blackfeet, Atisina, and Cheyenne. In the early part of the nineteenth century, fur traders began to work with the Native American groups in this region.\textsuperscript{26} Though there was a population in the area around Virginia City, it did not become a settled area until prospectors found gold in 1862.

Gold prospectors Barney Hughes, Thomas Cover, Henry Rodgers, William Fairweather, Henry Edgar, and Bill Sweeney camped along a small stream fringed with alder trees on their way to the mining camp of Bannack, Montana on May 26, 1863. Fairweather decided to try and pan the river for enough money to buy tobacco on his return to Bannack. Within four panning attempts, Fairweather extracted twelve dollars worth of gold, showing that the gulch had great potential. The six men then staked their 100 foot claims, dubbed the site Alder Gulch, and returned to Bannack to replenish their supplies. Though they tried to keep the find quiet, others soon found out about the wealth of Alder Gulch, and a stampede of men followed them back to Alder Gulch.\textsuperscript{27} By June 16, 1863 the town of Virginia City was incorporated.

During the first year of settlement, Virginia City was a town of tents and rough log and sod structures, built with trees cleared from the mountainsides (Figure 1.7). The first winter was harsh, with little food and few building supplies. By the next year, more substantial buildings began to be built out of plank and stone, showing

\textsuperscript{26} Arata, “Embers of the Social City,” 1-2.

\textsuperscript{27} Dick Pace and Sindy Cosens, \textit{Golden gulch: the story of Montana's fabulous Alder Gulch}, (Virginia City, MT: Dick Pace, 1962), 7-12.
the longevity of settlement expected in Virginia City.\textsuperscript{28} The population in the Alder Gulch area swelled to about 10,000, with Virginia City being the largest settlement. Mary Ronan, the daughter of a freighter who lived in Virginia City at this time described it: “hundreds of tents, bush wickiups, log cabins and even houses of stone quarried in the hills were springing up daily in the windings of Alder Gulch and

\textsuperscript{28} Arata, “Embers of the Social City”, 33.
Daylight Gulch, in the hollows of the hills.”²⁹ It became part of an economic network of new towns and cities in the Rocky Mountain region, where many persons acquired wealth either through mining or by providing goods or freight service to miners. At this time, there were no railroads in Montana, and the waterways available did not provide effective transportation, which left horse and wagon as the main form of transportation for goods. The roads passed through mountainous areas, and land inhabited by hostile Native Americans and gangs of road agents.³⁰

As a new city with little infrastructure, there was no established law enforcement to protect the new miners and their families from criminal activity. Yet even with a large male population, Virginia City itself was not a particularly high crime area, and most of the violence or illicit activity was limited to saloons.³¹ But freighters carrying large amounts of gold or much needed goods and supplies quickly became targets of highway men who would hold up travelers at gunpoint. Mary Edgerton, living in nearby Bannack, wrote about the danger of travel near Virginia City: “It is not safe now for men to travel alone if they have much money with them. There are too many highway robbers.”³² By 1864 a group of highway men, including


³² Mary Edgerton, James L. Thane, *A Governor’s Wife on the Mining Frontier: The Letters of Mary Edgerton from Montana, 1863-1865*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1976), 68.
Henry Plummer and George Ives, were accused of robbing and murdering nearly 100 people. Though the estimate of 100 murdered people was most likely an exaggeration, the highway men were a serious danger to the residents of Virginia City, and would hamper the growth of the town in the future. These highway men became the impetus for the forming of a vigilante committee, with Paris Pfouts as president. Within a few months, the committee tried and hung 24 men, including Sheriff Henry Plummer of Bannack, thought to be the ring leader. In May 1864, Montana was declared its own territory, with Bannack as the first capital, and a Governor was appointed, events signaling the end of vigilante law and the beginning of federal law in the area. The vigilantes did not relinquish power easily, but eventually a judge and governor were able to institute a more formal court and code of justice.\(^\text{33}\)

Virginia City quickly became the social and economic center of Montana, as well as a transportation hub. In 1865, the territorial capital was moved to Virginia City. The population of Alder Gulch, which consisted of Virginia City and a few smaller towns and ranches, at this time was diverse with many Euroamericans, Irish, Chinese, African Americans, Bannock Indians, and native-born Americans. By 1867, the town had approximately 1200 buildings, including stores, churches, schools, civic buildings, sawmills, and a telegraph office (Figure 1.8). The town also had a few newspapers, including the *Madisonian* and the *Montana Post*, which are still in operation today. There were many social activities in town, with dance halls, saloons, and home parties. Frances Gilbert Albright, part of the Gilbert family that ran a

\(^{33}\) Allen, *A Decent, Orderly, Lynching*, 348.
brewery in Virginia City, recalled sleigh riding and dances at the Good Templars Hall, and children’s dances with “the Ortons, a family of musicians,” at fifty cents admission. Though it was a busy and well established town, Americans from outside the western environment would not have called it civilized. There were many hurdy-gurdy girls, or prostitutes, who found their trade lucrative. The streets of Virginia City were full of saloons and billiard halls, and gambling and boxing matches, activities illegal in many other areas of the United States were not

34 Albright, Way Out West, 189.
uncommon. Mary Ronan recalls a famous boxing match between Con Orem and Hugh O’Neil where “two men, all but stripped on a platform circled round with rope, were brutally and furiously pummeling each other.”\textsuperscript{35} To counteract the lawlessness in Virginia City, community members began the building of churches and civic organizations in hopes of making Virginia City a civilized community.

By the end of its first decade, the population in Virginia City was already declining, as many of the miners left for Helena, Montana, the “last chance gulch”. In 1875, the territorial capital followed the population, with Virginia City losing its capital status to Helena. Though mining continued in Virginia City for another 70 years, the town never returned to its former prominence. A large brick courthouse with a stone foundation was commissioned in 1875, meant to be used as the state courthouse; it was finished in 1876, after the capital moved. Instead it has been in continual use ever since as the courthouse for Madison County. In 1872, Governor Potts announced that a railroad would come to Montana to encourage more people to settle in the state. Virginia City vied to be a stop along the railroad with the hope that it would bring new people. In the end, Virginia City’s isolation and declining fortunes caused it to be bypassed, never even receiving a feeder line. Though declining, Virginia City continued to have a busy main street, and many of the civic organizations, mining, and businesses continued to operate.

Income-producing activities in the Alder Gulch area during the early twentieth century included mining, commerce, agriculture, banking, education, and

\textsuperscript{35} Ronan, \textit{Girl from the Gulches}, 47.
government support jobs. Gold mining was the staple of Virginia City’s economy from its settlement in 1863 until the 1940s. Farming was not as prevalent in this area of Montana as it would be in other areas of the state, due to the mountainous terrain, but some landowners amassed enough acres to make a profit raising cattle. Merchants were able to stay afloat during this period, but the number of businesses in the business district along Wallace Street was much diminished by the 1930s. The population of Virginia City gradually decreased, taking with it both commerce and jobs.

Virginia City residents made many efforts to bring the town back to its former glory. Mining prospects were always hopeful, but they never brought the profits of early years; mining began to focus on large dredge operations which “were more concerned with extracting resources to the east for processing than with investing in the deteriorating community.” In 1921 there was brief hope that oil would bring prosperity to Virginia City, but no inexhaustible oil fields were found. Some improvements did occur in town, including the Thompson-Hickman Memorial Library, built in 1922. The library was housed on the second floor, with a Virginia City history museum on the first floor. In 1920, roads improvements connected Virginia City to Yellowstone National Park. This meant that automobiles were able to

become the preferred form of transportation in the area. It also brought tourism to Virginia City, offering a new form of economic revival.

Popular leisure and social activities in Virginia City during the early twentieth century included plays, movies, baseball, shopping, and clubs. Moving picture theaters were popular, with several going in and out of business between 1910 and the 1930s. Plays were performed by “the local high school, the local drama club, church events, and occasional performances by visiting entertainers.”

Baseball games were popular and well attended with several teams in Virginia City playing others throughout the state, including Little League, a local sports team named the Virginia City Road Agents, and an Elks league. Shopping was a leisure activity, a time when many residents socialized with others in their community. A popular stop for the women of the Alder Gulch region was the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store where they could look at fashion magazines, buy dress goods and accessories, and sit and chat by a warm stove.

By 1940 Virginia City was looking more and more like a ghost town. Several buildings were sitting vacant, and many others were gone entirely. The population had been declining rapidly since 1900, with twenty-nine percent of the population gone by 1930, as is seen in Table 1.1. But, for several reasons, the town was better preserved than many other western boomtowns. First the reason is the climate: dry, cold enough to prevent termites, and not too much snow to regularly cave

40 Pace and Cosens, Golden Gulch, 67.
in roofs. Second, unlike many other towns in Montana, Virginia City never experienced a major fire in the old part of town, so a higher proportion of early buildings survive. Third, the town’s economic difficulties proved a factor in preservation. Virginia City’s period of greatest prosperity was in the beginning, but its decline occurred so quickly that it never began to build more permanent and grander buildings, with the result that “hardly any new buildings have been built since 1876” on Wallace Street. Finally, the most significant factor in the survival of Virginia City after 1940 was the role played by Charles and Sue Bovey.

Table 1.1 – Population Change of Residents of Virginia City, Montana, 1900-1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population</strong></td>
<td>568</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percent Change</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-18%</td>
<td>-27%</td>
<td>-29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Charles Bovey was the son of the president of Royal Milling Company, which would later be known as General Mills. He graduated from the Phillips Academy in Andover Massachusetts in 1924, and was soon after was sent to work at a Royal Mills factory in Great Falls, Montana. In 1933, Charles Bovey married Rachel DeHaas and Ellingsen, *If These Walls Could Talk*, 2.

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41 DeHaas and Ellingsen, *If These Walls Could Talk*, 2.
Sue Ford, daughter of Montana pioneers and founders of the Great Falls National Bank. The Boveys bought and ran a successful ranch, while becoming engrossed in and avid collectors of Montana history. In 1942 the Boveys visited Virginia City, and recognized its potential as a tourist attraction. In 1944, the Boveys incorporated the Historic Landmark Society of Montana to preserve sites considered historic landmarks for Montana history, particularly Virginia City. Charles Bovey found that more work could be accomplished if he donated his own funds towards purchasing and restoring buildings in Virginia City. Though Charles and Sue Bovey continued to have other pursuits, such as Charles Bovey serving two terms in the Montana House of Representatives and twenty years as a state senator, they put much of their time and financial resources into preserving Virginia City. Virginia City became a tourist attraction with some buildings furnished as stores, restaurants and hotels, with others as historical displays created with Charles and Sue Bovey’s collections or objects left in the town’s buildings. By the 1950s, 175,000 tourists visited annually. Tourism was helped along by the construction of Highway 287 in 1945; the city became a National Historic Landmark in 1961. Charles Bovey was well-known in Virginia City

42 Bovey had his own definition of preservation, which is different than how preservation is defined today. Today preservation means “the act or process of applying measures necessary to sustain the existing form, integrity, and materials of an historic property.” Secretary of the Interior, “Preservation Terminology,” http://www.nps.gov/history/local-law/arch_stnds_10.htm, accessed April 4, 2011. Bovey instead would often change a building to make it appear older, more like a restoration, and would reconstruct new buildings that appeared to be from the 1860’s.

43 Sievert and Sievert, Virginia City and Alder Gulch, 43-44.

44 Sievert and Sievert, Virginia City and Alder Gulch, 45.
for his work on the structures, and for bringing in new collection pieces, many of which the local residents thought were junk, like old store inventories, arcade games, furnishings, and more.\(^{45}\)

One building that Charles Bovey purchased was the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store on lower Wallace Street. The McGovern family came to Virginia City with some of the earliest settlers in the region. In 1864, Patrick McGovern, an Irish immigrant, left Wisconsin for Montana, leaving behind his wife and two young children, one of them, baby Hannah McGovern. Within a year, he sent for his family and they settled in a log cabin in Nevada City, just one mile west of Virginia City, and he supported them through mining. McGovern was a successful miner, and in the 1870s the family purchased a ranch outside of Virginia City. The McGovern’s had five more children after moving to Montana, one of them a daughter named Mary, born in 1867. The children attended the local schools, and as they grew older, almost all of the McGovern children stayed in the Alder Gulch region. In 1920, at least three of the children still lived on the ranch with their mother, while Hannah and Mary were close by in Virginia City.

As adults, the McGovern sisters worked at Mrs. French’s Ladies Bazaar. It is unclear when the sisters began work at the store; in 1900, at age 39, Hannah McGovern worked in the French household on Wallace Street as a servant, while 33 year-old Mary still lived on the ranch with her parents. In 1908, Hannah purchased the

\(^{45}\) Sievert and Sievert, *Virginia City and Alder Gulch*, 45.
contents of the millinery store and began to run the Ladies Bazaar (Figure 1.9).\textsuperscript{46} Mary joined her in this venture, and began working at the store by 1909. In 1914, Hannah McGovern purchased the building on lower Wallace Street, where it remains today, and the sisters moved the business and their residence to that location. Hannah likely chose this location because it was very inexpensive, as it was on the edge of Virginia City’s once-thriving Chinese settlement. By 1910, this area at the west end of Wallace Street was nearly abandoned. The sisters ran the store until 1944, when they left it for their family’s ranch as Hannah was very sick and Mary needed to care for her.\textsuperscript{47} Hannah passed away in 1945, at the age of 84, and Mary stayed on the family ranch until her death in 1951, also at age 84. Neither Hannah nor Mary ever married or had children. This was especially unusual in the frontier west where there were fewer women than men, so women tended to marry at an early age.

When the sisters left the store in 1944, they flipped the sign to “closed”, and locked the doors. Soon after, Bovey worked out a deal with Mary McGovern, in which he paid her to leave the inventory in the building exactly as it was, and leave the curtains open so that tourists could look in. The money that Bovey paid the sisters was more than they had been making through sales at the store in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{48} After

\textsuperscript{46} Hannah purchased the contents of the store, and began to rent the building after the bizarre death of the Ladies Bazaar’s previous owner, Mrs. O. D. French, on January 27, 1909. While in Minnesota visiting her sister, Mrs. French was mistakenly given the wrong medicine, strychnine, by a druggist, which “dose was sufficient enough to have caused the death of eight persons.” McGovern Scrapbooks, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, MT.

\textsuperscript{47} John D. Ellingsen oral interview

\textsuperscript{48} John D. Ellingsen oral interview
Figure 1.9 Hannah and Mary McGovern in their store on Wallace Street, 1909
Source: Montana Historical Society, Helena Montana
Mary’s death, her brother and sister, Walter McGovern and Emma Owens, inherited the store. They sold the property, along with many of Hannah and Mary’s personal items and the store inventory, to Charles Bovey for “one dollar and other valuable considerations.” Bovey left the front, commercial portion of the store virtually untouched, aside from adding several items to the collection, to make the store appear older. Bovey reappropriated most of the items that were left in the residence portion of the store, using much of the furniture in other exhibits in Virginia City, and leaving some of the personal items on the shelves in the store area.

Charles and Sue Bovey continued to maintain buildings and run the tourism operations until their deaths - Charles Bovey in 1978, and Sue Bovey in 1988. Their son, Ford Bovey, inherited all of their properties, but found running the business and maintaining the buildings overwhelming, and soon after offered all of the properties he owned in Nevada City and Virginia City for sale, with the state of Montana having first option. This put the preservation of Virginia City at risk, and “while the Montana legislature debated the purchase, Virginia City appeared on the National Trust for Historic Preservation list of Americas’ Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places in 1992, 1993, and 1994.”

In 1997, the Montana legislature appropriated the funds to purchase the buildings, with the site first being managed by the Montana Historical Society, and now by the Montana Heritage Commission, a part


of the State of Montana government. These changes in ownership of the site meant that the interpretation of Virginia City changed as well. The Montana Heritage Commission’s main focus is to manage the collection, maintain the buildings, and provide visitor services. The interpretation of buildings is still in flux, with some new exhibits, and National Register interpretive signs, mixed in along with the original Bovey installations, some from as early as the 1950s. The Montana Heritage Commission is currently working on updating the interpretation, to give a more complex and accurate history of Virginia City.

**Methodology**

I first became interested in the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store, and Virginia City, Montana, during August 2009. I travelled to Virginia City as a graduate research assistant with a field crew from the Center for Historic Architecture and Design at the University of Delaware to do HABS architectural documentation of buildings in Virginia City. While documenting the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store, the building and its objects piqued my interest. I realized that the store, along with the other buildings in Virginia City, were remarkably intact, and warranted further study. The McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store contains an incredible collection of dress goods items, such as corsets, fabrics, and a myriad of buttons and spools of thread, dating from 1900 to 1940. Along with these items are account books kept by the McGovern sisters between 1909 and 1944, and some of their personal items, including books, photographs, diaries, scrapbooks, and magazines. The rest of the building is mostly free of their original items, but the building itself is intact in
terms of room layout, and decorative finishes like wallpaper and flooring. This thesis focuses on exploring rural western women’s consumerism during the early twentieth century through these resources.

The McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store was studied previously by Laura Arata in her masters’ thesis at the University of Washington titled, “Embers of the Social City: Business, Consumption, and Material Culture in Virginia City, Montana 1863-1945.” Arata conducted a material culture analysis of the McGovern sisters’ store and its objects in one of her chapters, looking at it within the context of consumerism and socialization in Virginia City between 1908 and 1945. At the time Arata was writing her thesis, the account books and some of the diaries had not yet been discovered. I used her thesis as a starting point for my research, especially in understanding Virginia City, and the McGovern sisters’ role within the town.

To gain a full context to discuss women’s consumerism at the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store and the Alder Gulch region, I looked at a wide range of sources. This was necessary, as the specific subject that I am studying has not been researched previously. There are many resources for women’s consumerism during the early twentieth century, but most of it focuses on middle-class women in urban and suburban contexts. There is some research on consumerism in rural America during the early twentieth century, which includes discussion about women, but little that focuses on women exclusively. It was also difficult to find research about western mining towns after their boom period. Specific topics researched for this thesis were: America’s mass consumerism movement during the early twentieth century, including mail order catalogs and department stores, and women as consumers; rural
consumerism in America during the early twentieth century; women in the west, especially in mining communities during the first half of the twentieth century; the history of mining communities in the west, with a focus on Virginia City and the Alder Gulch region, and architecture; the interpretation of country stores, dressmaking, western women, and gendered architecture. Combining these sources allowed me to create a context in which to study the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store as a place for consumption.

Sanborn insurance maps, as well as other historic maps, historic and current photographs, census data, and personal memoirs, and the McGovern account books provided insight into the cultural landscape of Virginia City. This supported the analysis of the changes in Virginia City’s landscape, what buildings were lost, the location of the residential and commercial district, and the types of businesses, houses, and social and religious organizations found in the town. Historic photos showed how the look and style of Virginia City changed overtime. Census data, memoirs and the customers of the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store as identified through the account books helped to people the landscape, and delve further into women’s experiences of a western mining town (this is necessary to understand where the McGovern sisters’ and their business fit within Virginia City, both socially and economically).

An analysis of the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store building using architectural drawings, physical evidence, historic photographs, and the objects left in the store, allow the reader to better understand the McGovern sisters, especially in an analysis of their scrapbooks. These sources also show the use of space within the building, and gendered aspects of the building and item displays.
Analysis of the account book in conjunction with population census data supported economic and demographic study of the store and its customer base. The account books cover much of the period from 1909 to 1944, though I believe that there is at least one more book for this period that is still missing. I began by creating a database of the account books which included variables for customer name, purchase date, items purchased, price of items, whether it was paid for or put on credit, and how payment was made. The account books were quite extensive, with 4,250 separate purchase entries. I used the account book database to gain both quantitative and qualitative information such as the average price of items, the frequency with which certain items are purchased, and the frequency of different customers, etc., and then compared that information across different time periods to analyze changes in the business.

The second step was to link the account book records to the population census to gain further information about the customers. I created a database of the manuscript population census records for Virginia City between 1900 and 1930 (the 1940 manuscript population census is not yet available). The variables collected were: name, street, relationship to head of household, whether they own or rent their home, age, gender, race, marital status, country or state of birth, occupation, and business type. The account book entries were then separated into two time periods, 1909-1925 and 1926-1935. Names were then linked between the census and account book to create a database of information about the customers for the two periods, the 1909-1925 entries compared with the 1900, 1910 and 1920 censuses, and the 1925-1944 entries compared with the 1920 and 1930 censuses. Next, I compiled a list of the
names that were not found in the Virginia City census, and used the Ancestry census search database, and found most of the other names within Madison County, Montana. The information was sorted in a way to have both quantitative and qualitative information about the McGovern sisters’ store customers. I compared the information about the customers to persons that did not shop at the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store City, and used census statistics to understand the population of the county, and how the customer base represented the population as a whole. I was unable to locate information about a few of the names, and this could be due to a variety of reasons such as these persons are not recorded in the census, their names being spelled so differently in the census from the account book entries that I could not connect them, or the account book entries lacking legibility which could have lead to misinterpretation.

The objects within the store were researched using mail order catalogs, magazines, and advertisements. The results allowed me to date objects carried in the store, and compare the objects with what is recorded in the account books. Dating the store objects is important in order to learn whether the store’s contents were outdated, and what the current style may have been in Virginia City at given points in time. Comparing the prices in the account book with mail order catalogs shows whether prices were above or below prices elsewhere in the United States, to determine whether the isolation of Virginia City had an effect on the price of goods. Advertisements show how the McGovern sisters attracted customers to their store, and used these advertisements to compete with other stores in Virginia City and mail order catalogs.
To create an interpretive plan for the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store, I researched exhibits of similar spaces and topics at other historic sites and online. Also, I looked at how the rest of Virginia City is currently exhibited and interpreted to ensure that my interpretation will fit within that framework. To better understand the previous interpretation framework for Virginia City history, I performed oral interviews with professionals who worked within interpretation in Virginia City, namely John D. Ellingsen, Ellen Baumler, and Bill Peterson.

**Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis consists of five chapters including introduction and conclusion. The introduction establishes the historic context for the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store. The overall thesis is that the McGovern sisters’ adopted both modern and traditional business practices in order to operate a successful business during challenging economic times. In order to fully explore this argument, I divided the middle portion of the thesis into three chapters. The chapters start with the wider view of the landscape of Virginia City and Madison County, and narrow in to focus on the McGovern store building, and the business operations. This thesis concludes by making a major recommendation to use the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store as a place to interpret women’s economic history in Virginia City, Montana during the early twentieth century.

Chapter Two explores the feminized landscape of Virginia City between 1900 and 1940. Women experienced the built environment of Virginia City differently than men, with their experiences restricted due to societal expectations. To
explore this landscape Sanborn maps, photographs, population census records, and the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store business records are used. The landscape includes comparison of the population of Virginia City between 1910 and 1930 to the customers at the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store between 1909 and 1944. The McGovern Sisters’ Store’s customers were representative of the residents of Virginia City, and the customer base was drastically affected by the aging and decline of Virginia City’s population between 1900 and 1930. This chapter also explores the economic and population decline of Virginia City between 1900 and 1940, and how this change affected women’s experiences and how women moved within the landscape in Virginia City.

Chapter Three examines at the McGovern sisters’ store building and the objects within to show how the McGovern sisters adapted a rough log structure to create both a public commercial store space that was attractive and accessible to Virginia City women, and a private residential space that showed the McGovern sisters middle-class respectability. This chapter shows how both the customers and the McGovern sisters interacted with and changed the space. The section which discusses the private residential space is used to further understand the McGovern sisters.

Chapter Four looks at how the McGovern sisters’ used both traditional and modern business techniques in order to operate a successful business. This chapter is an economic analysis of the store, and uses the account book, advertisements, and the store inventory to understand how the store operated, and how the way in which the store operated changed over time.
The conclusion demonstrates the need to increase the interpretation of women at museums and historic sites in the inter-mountain west. The major recommendation for this thesis is that the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store is an ideal space in which to interpret women’s economic history in twentieth century Virginia City, and would give this National Historic Landmark the chance to offer a more varied and accurate women’s perspective. Oral history interviews and a current interpretive plan are used to understand the place of women’s interpretation in Virginia City. This chapter also explores how women’s history is interpreted at other historic sites and museums in the inter-mountain west.
Western mining towns, by their very nature were masculine landscapes, and Virginia City was no exception. The town’s creation and growth centered in the mining industry, an industry that did not employ women. Mary Edgerton, wife of Sidney Edgerton, the territorial governor of Montana in the 1860s, wrote of her experiences residing in mining communities such as Virginia City and nearby Bannack, in letters to family back east where “men did most of the shopping and nearly all the gossiping” while women “led secluded lives – almost cloistered in their lack of contact with the outside world”. 51 Most American women in the early twentieth century “made their living through their interactions – marital, economic, or service oriented – with men”. 52 Though this was true for many women, there are many exceptions, like the McGovern sisters in Virginia City. Western towns have the reputation as places of less societal restrictions than the eastern United States. Many women in Virginia City, the McGovern sisters included, “redefined domesticity pushed the boundaries of acceptable norms, and created wage opportunities for themselves.” 53 Virginia City’s landscape was experiencing extensive change between

51 Edgerton, A Governor’s Wife on the Mining Frontier, 48.

52 Woodsworth-Ney, Women in the American West, 158.

53 Woodsworth-Ney, Women in the American West, 160.
1900 and 1940, slipping from a mining boom town, into a ghost town with “the way that the residents interacted with their environment also changing.”54 Female experiences were affected by the changing landscape of Virginia City, with women experiencing and using the landscape differently than men, and these differences were influenced by societal restrictions.

The McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store is an ideal location in which to explore the feminine landscape of Virginia City. The store was a place where women of all classes in Virginia City would meet, from prostitutes to laundresses to the wives of lawyers. The store was the most female-oriented public space in Virginia City as it was created, frequented, and run by women. Women’s experiences are difficult to piece together, especially in a small western town during the time period of 1900 and 1940. Much research has been completed on women in the west in mining communities during the ‘wild west’ period, and significantly less after the end of the boom, or post 1900 for Virginia City. To construct female experiences of the landscape, this chapter will compare the customers of the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store with the Virginia City population, as well as look at historic maps and photographs.

Virginia City is set amongst mountains, with the town outlined around the main business thoroughfare, Wallace Street. Wallace Street only consists of about four blocks, ending at a seemingly open landscape on either side, with the next two towns, Ennis to the east and Alder to the west, being at least a mile away. Commercial

buildings are more heavily concentrated on the east side of Wallace Street, near the courthouse, with the area where the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store is located. The west end of Wallace contained fewer businesses. Many of the buildings along Wallace Street are much like the McGovern Sister’s Dress Goods Store, namely log structures with false fronts. There are several more substantial buildings built of brick or stone and up to two stories in height, which are mixed in between the older log structures. Though the mining industry was decreasing between 1900 and 1940, miners still significantly affected the landscape where “Prospectors still outfit in its stores, and dredge workers make it their home.”Virginia City went through many economic, social, and demographic changes between 1900 and 1940 that were reflected in the landscape.

Virginia City was still a bustling city during the early part of the twentieth century, though it was significantly decreased from the nineteenth century (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Virginia City was the county seat of Madison County, which meant that government workers and lawyers for the county were likely to locate there, and people from nearby towns and rural areas would need to visit it. Most buildings in town are still in use, with many businesses offering a wide variety of services from entertainment to tailoring. Since the business area was fairly small, the McGovern sisters were in close proximity to, and most likely in contact with, many of the other businesses in Virginia City. On their way to purchase groceries or mail a letter, they could pass places of ill repute like a saloon.

Figure 2.1 View of Wallace Street, looking east, ca. 1878. Source: McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana.
The Customers of the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store, and the Women of Virginia City

Virginia City’s population declined by 320 persons between 1900 and 1930, with the population at 568 in 1900, and only 241 in 1930. The population decrease in Virginia City had many affects on the demographic of the customers and citizens of Virginia City including raising the average age, less racial and ethnic diversity, a more equal gender distribution, and a rise in the marital rate. To
understand the customers that the McGovern sisters served and how this customer base changed between 1909 and 1944, the population will be looked at in two sections, the first comparing account book entries between 1909-1925 to the 1900, 1910 and 1920 censuses, and the second comparing the 1926-1944 account book entries to the 1930 and 1930 censuses. The residents’ information is taken from the population census of all those living in Virginia City for the years 1900 through 1930.

Virginia City was a racially and ethnically diverse community in the nineteenth century, but as the population began to decrease, so did the diversity of the population (Table 2.1). In the 1910s, the majority of Virginia City’s population (80 percent) was comprised of white native-born persons, when almost twenty percent were European immigrants, African American, American Indian, or Chinese. By the 1930s the majority of Virginia City’s population was white and native-born, with only 3 percent having been born outside of the United States, and only one person of another racial group - Sarah Bickford who was identified as “negro”.

Table 2.1 Race and Ethnicity of Virginia City, Montana Residents, 1900-1930

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</tbody>
</table>
The decrease of other ethnic groups can be attributed largely to Virginia City’s loss of its Chinese population after 1900. Since Virginia City’s inception, there was a significant Chinese population, most of whom were miners, and a few who ran small businesses. The Chinese lived on the lower end of Wallace Street, with their section beginning next door to the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store building, and continuing down Wallace Street (Figure 2.3). The Chinese with other miners began to leave in the late nineteenth century to areas of better potential for wealth, but some also tried to stay in Virginia City and establish a community. Chinese attempts to settle in Virginia City were blocked by racist sentiment of residents, and increasingly restrictive laws put forth by the Montana legislature, which made it almost impossible for them to run businesses and own property. These laws were instituted both before and after Montana reached statehood in 1889, and included restricting Chinese from owning mining properties, and special taxes on laundries. Most Chinese communities were overwhelmingly male, with no Chinese women left in Virginia City by 1900.56 By 1910, the lack of women, restrictive laws, and racist sentiments, drove the Chinese away from Virginia City forever.

Virginia City’s population of European immigrants decreased for other reasons. Many of the early residents were immigrants seeking wealth through mining. As the mining potential in Virginia City declined, it would no longer be a destination

for immigrants looking to make their fortune. European immigrants going to Montana would likely have chosen the booming city of Butte or the agricultural fields of eastern Montana over dying mining towns like Virginia City. The European immigrants who remained were passing away by the 1930s, and their children were likely to be native-born Americans, thus decreasing those identified by other ethnicities in census data.
Virginia City, Montana held a more complex view of race and ethnicity than was present in other areas of the United States. On the one hand, its citizens were highly restrictive towards the Chinese, whom they viewed as an economic threat in the mining industry. On the other hand, some African Americans were able to gain a comfortable standard of living, and a place of power in the community. This is apparent in one of the store’s customers, Sarah Bickford; who, along with her three daughters, were the only non-white customers that shopped at the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store (Table 2.2). Sarah Bickford married a white man, Stephen Elmer Bickford, who was a pioneering Virginia City miner, and later had a large share in the Virginia City waterworks. After his death, Sarah Bickford took over the management of the waterworks becoming quite possibly the first African American woman in the United States to own a share in a utility company. The prominent role that Sarah Bickford had within the community shows that there was at least some degree of acceptance and opportunity for minority groups. Inter-racial marriage was a controversial subject in America during this period, with many states having miscegenation laws, including Montana in 1909. Though not all residents of Virginia City were comfortable with Sarah Bickford’s marriage and position of power as manager of the waterworks, she must have been accepted to a certain degree, as evidenced by her decision to stay in Virginia City into her elder years in 1930, when all of her children had moved away.
Table 2.2 Race and Ethnicity of McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store Customer, 1909-1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>1909-1925</th>
<th></th>
<th>1926-1944</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Native Born</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Foreign Born</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As with most mining towns, men made up the majority of Virginia City (Table 2.3). As the town began to develop, the population started to be more evenly distributed between men and women. This was customary in the development of many western communities. This contributed to a myth in the west where women’s “very presence on the frontier was enough to make rough and rowdy men, think about polite behavior and the establishment of civilized institutions like schools, churches and libraries.” It was not just the presence of women that encouraged men to establish societal institutions, but often women who instigated and worked on the establishment of a community. Women would come together to complete these tasks, such as through women’s groups

---

Table 2.3 Gender of Virginia City Residents, 1900-1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1920-1930</th>
<th>1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Virginia City, like many other cities in the United States, had a ladies’ society, several churches and a public school (Figure 2.4). Even as the population began to dwindle, the churches and school continued to serve a very small group. Women were often the teachers at the school, active in churches, and sometimes members of ladies’ organizations. For example, the McGovern sisters, along with several of their customers, belonged the Ladies of the Maccabees. The Ladies of the Maccabees was a women’s fraternal and benevolent organization, which hosted social activities, provided sick care for members and money for their children if they died. Though the social benefits of these organizations were important, women greatly benefitted from having protection in case of sickness or death, which would have been especially important for unmarried women like the McGovern sisters.

Dress goods stores were female places, as men rarely made their own clothing. The customers that the McGovern Sisters’ served were almost exclusively
women, as is shown in Table 2.4. Men shopped less frequently at the store than women, and those who did, like Swiss laborer Paul Amberg, tended to purchase such as cheese cloth and surgeon cloth for printing and cheese-making. Most of them were listed as the name on the account for their wives, or other family members. For example, on January 4, 1910, Johnnie Smith Ennis purchased a corset “by his sister”.

Figure 2.4 View of Idaho Street, showing Church and Public School, Source: Digital Sanborn Maps collection, Virginia City, MT, 1922.
Men’s and women’s clothing was made and purchased separately prior to and during the early twentieth century. Men would have opted for ready-made clothing, had their clothing made by women in their family, or if they could afford it, by a male tailor. Women also purchased ready-made clothing, would make their own, or if they could afford it, have it made by a female dressmaker. Women in Virginia City had several options for buying their clothing in Virginia City, including; ready-made clothing from the Robert Vickers Company\textsuperscript{58}, purchasing dress goods or ready-made clothing from mail-order catalogs, having their clothing made by dressmakers of which there were at least three, including the McGovern sisters, or purchasing dress goods to make their own clothing from the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods store. Men’s only option in obtaining clothing was ready-made clothing from the Robert Vickers Company, the J. Albright Clothing store\textsuperscript{59} or mail order catalogs, with no tailor listed in the census. Men likely relied on women in their family for part of their clothing needs, making men an indirect customer of the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store.

The McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store customers came from a wide geographic area, though the majority of their customers were from Virginia City (Table 2.5). As the county seat of Madison County, residents from other towns or farms would often need to visit Virginia City, providing a chance for the McGovern

\textsuperscript{58} The Robert Vicker’s Company was on Wallace Street, from the 1880’s until about 1930. It sold clothing and dress good items for all genders and ages, as well as other grocery and dry goods items.

\textsuperscript{59} The J. Albright Clothing Store operated on Wallace Street between 1889 and closed in 1933, and sold men’s clothing.
sisters to widen their customer base. People came to Virginia City to perform activities associated with the county government, such as to consult a lawyer and file a

Table 2.4 Gender of McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store Customers, Virginia City, Montana, 1909-1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1909-1925</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1926-1944</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1926-1944</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1909-1925</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.5 Geographic Distribution of McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store Customers, Virginia City, Montana, 1909-1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Virginia City</td>
<td>1909-1925</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Virginia City</td>
<td>1926-1944</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1909-1925</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
house deed, but would likely also visit the shops in town. A look at the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store list of customers shows that at least a third (an average between the two time periods) came from outside Virginia City. Madison County comprised a wide geographic area, or 3,603 square miles, which is larger than the state of Rhode Island. Madison County had a low population density, with only two people per square mile. The customers for the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store lived within all areas of Madison County, traveling from as far as Jefferson, which was 49 miles away (Figure 2.5). This is a considerable distance when transportation issues are considered.

Madison County is a mountainous area, and has a lot of snowfall during the winter months making travel by horse or car very difficult. There was no train that stopped in Virginia City, and no highway connecting the towns until 1945. It was likely that when most people came to visit Virginia City, they would need to plan to spend an entire day, and sometimes a night, due to the substantive time needed to travel. These conditions likely improved into the 1920’s as automobile use became more common. Residents in Madison County were using cars by at least this time, with a parking garage and automobile shop in town by 1922 (Figure 2.6). Cars were an indispensible resource for people in an isolated rural community like Madison County, and allowed them to have more freedom of movement than they ever did before.

The car also could expand a woman’s sphere, and “some studies maintain that farm women gained independence by using the car to extend their spheres of
Figure 2.5 Map showing location of McGovern Sisters' Dress Goods Store Customers
influence and redefine their gender roles.” Alternatively, a car could also cause more work and restrictions for women, due to the expense of

---

60 Kline, *Consumers in the Country*, 81.
purchasing a car, and the expectation that the car would shorten the amount of time it would take to do tasks, thus increasing the women’s potential work load. For families that could afford them, the automobile allowed a woman to break up the monotony of her life, by visiting friends and town more often, or saving time to open up the possibility of wage opportunities.

The role of women in Montana was changing and evolving during the early twentieth century. The women’s suffrage movement was in full swing, with “universal suffrage – the vote – for women passed in every western state except New Mexico before passage and state ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment,” including Montana in 1914. In 1916 Montana elected Jeannette Rankin, the first woman to the U.S. Congress. Montanans also elected two women—Maggie Hathaway and Emma Ingalls—to the Montana legislature. This makes it appear that women in western states like Montana had greater freedom and power in their communities than ever before. Though this is true, women still followed societal constraints and gender roles “that expected women to bear and care for children; to cook, keep house, and provide clothing for their families; and to provide sexual intimacy for men and emotional support for kin and community.” Women’s interactions with the built environment in Virginia City were influenced by these societal expectations and restrictions.

---


It was expected that a woman would marry fairly young during the early twentieth century. Woman’s role in American society was based upon her role in the home; her chief role was homemaking and child-rearing: “females represented the moral foundation of the family and society, and that a commitment to family preceded and took precedence over a commitment to self.”

Marriage would also allow a woman a higher economic status, since during the twentieth century, men earned more than women in all employment fields. At the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store, the majority of the customers, or between 56 and 61 percent, were married, as is shown (Table 2.6). This was higher than the marriage totals for Virginia City, where only 32 to 40 percent were married (Table 2.7). Virginia City’s marriage totals are less than the customer’s totals partly because it is of the whole population, including those under marital age. It is also likely that married women may have had a greater income to spend on dress goods, as well as being responsible for the clothes of more individuals.

Customers of the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store were mostly listed as unemployed, with a few, or about one-third having formal employment. Women listed as employed were mainly in traditional fields, like nurses, cooks, maids, teachers, telephone operators, and prostitutes. The women who were employed are more likely to be without a male head of household, and women who were married

---

with children who worked were likely to be of a lower-class. Though women were an important economic force in every household, they are not always recognized as

Table 2.6 Marital Statuses of McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store Customers, Virginia City, Montana, 1909-1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.7 Marital Statuses of Virginia City, Montana Residents, 1900-1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
employed in census data. To understand women’s employment and economic status, it is necessary to look at their employment, their husband’s employment, and the work that they did in their household that had economic significance.

Table 2.8, has been categorized as follows: Employment that fit within service are prostitute, laundress, cook (except for cooks for agricultural workers), and saleswoman. Agriculture includes anyone employed full-time in agriculture, and includes cooks, farm managers, and agricultural laborers, and at least one farmer. Professional jobs are those that required some type of formal or specialized experience and include teachers, nurses, bank workers, post officers, stenographers, and one collection specialist. Others are those that do not fit into any of the other categories, and mainly consist of small business owners.

For the most part women in the workforce in Virginia City only had certain areas of employment available to them. Women often worked at jobs that were fairly closely aligned with the sort of work that they provided in their homes as wives and mothers. In a way this helped women retain their femininity and their “aura of domesticity, even as they edged into the public work force.” Likely, women only worked when it was necessary to support their families, and so single women and women of lower economic classes were much more likely to be employed. These women would have performed double duty, and be expected to both bring income into their families, while still caring for children, cooking meals, and performing housework.

---

The majority of women at the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods store were part of an informal economy. This does not mean that they were only housewives, but rather they may also have contributed to their family’s finances. Women’s work was not always recognized through census records, as they were not considered full-time workers, though their work was economically essential to most households. Women in Montana would sometimes start small side businesses in order to help the families’ income, doing things like raising turkeys, producing dairy products, selling vegetables, or making and mending clothing. This money would often give families the opportunity to purchase consumer goods, especially for farm families where “butter production, along with eggs from the chickens women raised, were important elements of the domestic economy, for the money received from their sale was sometimes the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1909-1925</th>
<th>1926-1944</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Sector</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Employed</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>155%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.8 Employment of McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store Customers, Virginia City, Montana, 1909-1944
only cash income a family had.” The McGovern sisters appear to have, at least occasionally, sold produce for extra income. On July 23, 1910, Mrs. Moody purchased 1 gallon of peas, and a week later, some potatoes. The McGovern sisters must have had a garden, and saw an opportunity to sell produce to customers.

As many of the female customers were listed as not employed in the census, it is necessary to look at the employment of the male heads of household to better understand their economic and social class (Table 2.9). Most men were not employed in service-type jobs, and those who were either worked as janitors or store clerks. Agriculture was the largest employment group for men, who were farmers, farm managers, or farm laborers. Professional employment includes the jobs that require some sort of education or specialized training, such as lawyers, doctors, government workers, engineers, and bankers. Mining included those who both worked independently, and those that worked for other companies, usually on dredge boats. Those employed in mining dropped between the first and second periods, due to the decline of mining overall in the Virginia City area. The “other” category is for those that did not fit within the above categories, includes small business owners, and those listed as laborers doing ‘odd jobs’. Every family that shopped at the McGovern Sisters’ store had at least one or more person employed within the family.

It appears that the customers at the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store are from two economic groups, middle class or working class. According to the types

of employment found in the census, small business owners and government workers likely fit within middle class standards, and miners and laborers likely fit within working class standards. In larger cities and population areas in the Northeast,

Table 2.9 Employment of Male Head of Household of McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store Customers, Virginia City, Montana, 1909-1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1909-1925</th>
<th></th>
<th>1926-1944</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Sector</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Employed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

these two groups would not shop at the same location, with department stores for the middle class, and variety stores for the working class. The community of Madison County was too small to make this distinction, thus requiring the McGovern sisters’ to attract both economic classes. This was not difficult because women of both groups had similar goals in clothing purchases, namely to assert their independence while showing respectability and social status.

Entering the twentieth century, the ideal of separate spheres for men and women was still present. The women’s sphere was in the “domestic setting where her
superior moral influence could restrain the vices of her husband and mold the character of future citizens, her children.”66 Women were not expected to take part in most areas of public life except for “the church, the schoolroom and the religious or benevolent voluntary association.”67 They were able to use separate spheres to gain power outside of the home as “the nation was also a home,” allowing them to “establish some civic and public power, at least in matters that threatened the democratic values of the nation.”68 Though this was the societal expectation, not every woman in Virginia City followed this due to financial need, and sometimes personal preference. There were many women business owners in Virginia City, as well as women who worked outside of the home at hotels, private homes, the courthouse, the school, and telephone office. Women also partook in the entertainment within Virginia City including the playhouse and later the movie theater, and dance hall. There were some places in Virginia City where no respectable woman would ever venture, such as a brothel or saloon.

Public drinking was only acceptable for men in the early twentieth century. Women drank alcohol, but always within their homes; any woman drinking at a bar or saloon was considered a loose woman at best, or a prostitute. Saloons and bars were places where men could congregate and socialize, and women were essentially barred.


68 Woodsworth-Ney, Women in the American West, 108.
For men the saloon “united sociability, psychological support, and economic services.” But for women, saloons were dangerous places. Drinking establishments were lures for a man to spend his wages, sometimes spending money that was needed to support his wife and children. The area around saloons also “could be hazardous spaces where women were subjected to harassment by drunks and loafers.” Saloon proliferated the landscape of Virginia City, with at least five saloons, as well as billiard halls and a bowling alley for a population of under 500 persons (Figure 2.7). These issues encouraged the temperance movement, where women worked to make alcohol consumption illegal.

Prohibition was enacted nationwide in 1920. Prohibition left its mark on the landscape. Establishments focused around alcohol use—like saloons and billiard halls—disappeared from the landscape according to the 1922 Sanborn map (Figure 2.8). Though this changed the way that men socialized and spent their leisure time in Virginia City, it was likely an improvement for women. Women experienced fewer danger areas when walking through the town, and may have had income at their disposal. Prohibition, of course, only stopped the legal consumption of alcohol, but alcohol use was still just as prevalent in America during the period. Prohibition changed the way that it was consumed, and opened up the social use of alcohol to women. During the period of prohibition, 1920-1933, views on women’s alcohol

69 Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 17.

70 Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 27.
Figure 2.7 Map of the crossing of Waller and Jackson Streets, showing five saloons, Source: Digital Sanborn Maps collection, Virginia City, MT, 1907.
Figure 2.8 Map of the crossing of Waller and Jackson streets, with all of the Saloons gone from the 1907 map. Source: Digital Sanborn Maps collection, Virginia City, MT, 1922.
consumption began to change, where in speakeasies and nightclubs across the country, women were there with the men and it “accelerated the advent of heterosocial night life as new watering holes welcomed young couples, and groups of women as well as men.” Though women staying out late at night and drinking was not widely accepted by society, it now did not label a woman as loose or a prostitute, and stain her respectable reputation.

A common image of the western woman is the prostitute. Prostitution in western mining towns could be a big business, and was a lucrative female-controlled business. Most houses of prostitution appear to be located on the outskirts of town. There are two houses of prostitution visible on maps in the early 1900s, located near lower Wallace Street, across Daylight Creek, and are listed as female boarding (Figure 2.9). There were other buildings in Virginia City, which housed prostitution, such as ‘The Brick” on Cover Street, but they are not identified on maps, and no prostitutes are listed as living there in the 1910 census. The businesses that would be closest to these female boarding houses were the Chinese properties and businesses. This illustrates a trend which permitted houses of prostitution, as long as they did not disrupt respectable society. Virginia City’s “female boarding’ house” was in a location where most respectable people would not have to pass it.

But there was a space in Virginia City where both respectable women and prostitutes may have come in contact with each other, the McGovern Sisters’ Dress

71 Mary Murphy, Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-41, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 43.
Goods Store. Several of the most frequent customers during the early period of the store, between 1909 and 1927, worked as prostitutes, and they shopped alongside married middle class women. Two of these women are Maggie Coleman and Jenne Ashley, both identified as Madams in the 1910 US population census for Virginia City. Out of the six women who are identified as prostitutes, five worked under Maggie Coleman or Jenne Ashley. It is most likely that these women ran the houses...
that are found on the map, as there street is not listed, as they section across Daylight Creek did not have a road, and they are listed directly next to each other in the census. Both women were frequent customers of the store between 1909 and 1912, and bought assorted dress good item such as cloth, thread, and clasps, as well as corset and hair accessories.

Prostitution had been a big business in Virginia City since it was settled in the 1860’s but steadily decreased as the population and mining decreased going into the twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1920, prostitution seems to have had another large decrease as Prostitutes are no longer listed in the census after 1910, and the female boarding houses previously listed on the map are identified as dwellings by 1922 (Figure 2.10). Out of the six prostitutes and two madams that were listed in the 1910 census, only Jennie Ashley is in the 1920 census, and she is listed as having no employment.\footnote{For an example of the Virginia City census identifying prostitutes, see Appendix B} Prostitution declined for several reasons. First, as the population declined, prostitution was no longer lucrative enough and women moved on or found other sources of income. Second, after 1910, the gender distribution and the number of married individuals in Virginia City increased, which left fewer men that were
Figure 2.10 Map of former female boarding house, which is now a dwelling.
Source: Digital Sanborn Maps Collection, Virginia City, MT, 1922.

seeking female companionship. Third, during World War I in 1917, there was a syphilis epidemic, causing many houses of prostitution to shut down across the country, and requiring most prostitutes to operate more discretely than before, so they would not identify themselves as prostitutes to the wider public.

The biggest change in Virginia City’s landscape during the early twentieth century is an increase in building vacancy along with a substantial loss of buildings.
By 1922, at least 36 percent of the buildings are listed as vacant, and there is extreme loss of buildings. Although the full scale of this loss is not known, the corner of Jackson Street and Wallace Street exemplifies the trend. In 1904, there are many buildings running down the street, and they are all occupied. The buildings include a large general merchandise store known as Content Corner, a lodging house, a wash house, and a paint shop (Figure 2.11). Some of the buildings are already vacant at this time, but are still standing. In 1907, the lodging house has become vacant, and one of the formerly vacant buildings is gone (Figure 2.12). By 1922, Content Corner, its adjoining wash house, and the former paint shop are left standing and the three buildings that were behind Content Corner and the two buildings to the left of Content Corner on Wallace Street are gone (Figure 2.13).

Population decline is also illustrated in the average age of residents in Virginia City (Table 2.10). In 1900, the population was young, with an average age of 19. By 1920 the average age rose to 32. It is likely that many of the younger residents left for greener pastures, hoping to be able to make a better income in larger towns and
Figure 2.11 Map of corner of Wallace and Jackson Streets, Source: Digital Sanborn Maps collection, Virginia City, MT, 1904.
Figure 2.12 Map of corner of Wallace and Jackson Streets, Source: Digital Sanborn Maps collection, Virginia City, MT, 1907.
Figure 2.13 Map of corner of Wallace and Jackson Streets, Source: Digital Sanborn Maps collection, Virginia City, MT, 1922.
cities. Those that stayed may have had more capital invested in the town. An older population could also be due to the fact that birthrates decline with the economy, and so married couples may have been having fewer children.

The average age of customers at the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store also rises, but at a lesser rate, going from 36 to 38 (Table 2.11). The average age of customers at the store is much older than the average age of residents in Virginia City. This may be because older women likely had access to more money than younger women, either through jobs or marriage. It is also possible that the McGovern sisters had a more difficult time attracting young customers. Young women may have been more interested in the new ways of getting clothing, like ready-made clothing and ordering from mail-order catalogs, and were not interested in making their own clothing, or having it made by a dressmaker. Older women, that had grown-up without ready-made clothing and mail-order catalogs, may have been more comfortable shopping at a dress goods store. Also, older women would have been the McGovern sisters’ contemporaries, and may have continued to shop at the store to visit their friends.

Conclusion

Despite living within a masculine culture, women in Virginia City were able to build a community in which they and their families could be safe and
Table 2.10 Average Age of Virginia City Residents, 1900-1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th></th>
<th>1910</th>
<th></th>
<th>1920</th>
<th></th>
<th>1930</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 and Above</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.11 Average Age of Customers at McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store, Virginia City, Montana, 1909-1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>1909-1925</th>
<th></th>
<th>1926-1944</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 and Above</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
comfortable. Gender roles in Virginia City were shaped by the idea of separate spheres, with women’s domain the private home instead of public spaces. When women went into the public spheres, such as saloons, they could lose their respectable status. Despite this, women in Virginia City created their own public places within the society. The McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store was an important public meeting place for these women, meaning much more to them than simply a dress goods store.
Chapter 3
AN ARCHITECTURAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE ANALYSIS OF THE MCGOVERN SISTERS’ DRY GOODS STORE BUILDING

The McGovern Sisters’ store is one of the only public spaces in early twentieth century Virginia City that was created for, frequented by, and run by women. The building had been in use as a business space since the settlement of Virginia City in 1863 but, in 1914, the McGovern sisters bought the building and carved out their own space in the dwindling mining town. Before the sisters inhabited the building, it slowly grew and changed from a small rough log cabin in 1863, to a larger dual purpose residential and commercial building, within a three-building commercial complex. The sisters used resources available to decorate their home; muslin to create the look of plaster ceilings, wholesaler advertisements and magazine prints for wall decoration, and old rags to make a mop. To make the store attractive for customers, they had glass display cases and a sitting area, but they still used traditional form of item display by having items in bulk, and in a space where customers would need to ask for assistance to view goods. The McGovern sisters created two spaces within the building: a public commercial space that was that was accessible and attractive to women, and their own private residential space that displayed middle-class
respectability and values. This chapter begins with an overview of the building and
the building’s history, and then delves into the public and private areas of the building.

The McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store is located on the main business
thoroughfare in Virginia City, Wallace Street, and is the central portion of a three-
building commercial complex (Figure 3.1). It is set back from the road by about nine
feet by a wooden boardwalk. The building is constructed of round logs with V-
notching, covered by a gable roof, and frame Greek Revival false front. This structure
was built as both a commercial and residential space, with the eastern front two rooms
used as commercial space and the rest of the building serving as living space. At the
rear exterior there are two attached sheds along with a porch. The back of the building
is not as architecturally finished as the front, and is uneven, with the shed additions
protruding at irregular depths. The rear of the complex includes an array of
outbuildings including outhouses, barns, chicken coops, and a fire shed, but it is not
clear which may have been used by the McGovern sisters.

The development and architectural design of this store is similar to many
other western mining town residential/commercial buildings. Constructed during the
gold rush in 1863, this structure was built quickly and with local material, log, to
provide adequate shelter before the onset of the harsh Montana winter, as well as to
Figure 3.1 Environmental view of McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store, showing lower Wallace Street, Source: by Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
allow the builder to start earning a profit from providing goods to or housing miners. Later, when resources and weather permitted, the structure would be added to, and start to resemble commercial buildings in “civilized” cities and towns in the United States.

The McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store clearly began as a smaller log cabin, described by Mary Ronan, one of the occupants, as “a big log cabin on Wallace Street”. This can also be shown by the thickness of the front section east and west walls, which possibly hint at the first cabin (Figure 3.2). It is unclear exactly when the rear additions were constructed, but they were probably intended to expand the living area of the building. The Goldbergs, who operated a dry goods store in the building between 1864 and 1865, likely added the false-front by 1865. Historically there were two separate buildings that make-up the current day McGovern store. They include the Weston Hotel, and a large commercial store, that were later combined into a single building. The Weston Hotel portion is the eight-foot wide portion on the west side of the building constructed around 1865, in the space between the McGovern store, and neighboring Kraemer store. When first built, the Weston Hotel served as a hotel, at a time when living space in Virginia City was scarce. Later the Weston Hotel served as a residence, and then was combined with the McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods store building.

Originally constructed in 1863, the McGovern Store has gone through drastic changes and expansions since. James and Ann Sheehan built the original log

73 Mary Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches*, 34.
Figure 3.2 Floor Plan of McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store, Source: by Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
section of the store in 1863, and operated a boarding house there until 1864, when they
sold it to a group of prospectors, including Goldberg. Goldberg and his wife operated
a dry goods store in the building for about a year, until it was sold in 1865 to Joseph
Knight for $1,800. Joseph Knight sold the building again in 1866 to Etienne Dupius
for $2,000, the highest price that the property ever paid for the property. It then passed
through several hands between 1866 and 1914, not unusual in a western mining town
during this period where entrepreneurs moved frequently to locate where the
population and wealth were concentrated. The American west during the latter half of
the nineteenth century was a place of great mobility for its inhabitants, who “stayed
only so long as there was money to be made” making “locations and circumstances
take on a temporary quality.”\textsuperscript{74} The value of the building fell steadily, until Hannah
McGovern bought it for $1.00 in 1914. Though it is unclear when the Weston Hotel
and the McGovern sisters’ store became one building, the two began to be sold
together as one property starting in 1891, as evidenced in a deed between Thomas
Deyarman and Joseph Haines. Between 1866 and 1914 the inhabitants used the
building as a dry goods store or as a residence. The McGovern sisters’ operated a
store within the building until 1944, and in 1956, Mary McGovern’s heirs (her siblings

\textsuperscript{74}C. Elizabeth Raymond, “‘I Am Afraid We Will Lose All We Have Made,’ Women’s
lives in a Nineteenth Century Mining Town,” in \textit{Comstock Women: The Making of a
Walter McGovern and Emma Owens) gave the building and most of the objects within it to the Virginia City Trading Company.

The McGovern store is a false-front commercial building. A false-front building is a building with a non-load bearing façade attached to the front (Figure 3.3). The façade creates a false impression of the building, making it appear as if it is more architecturally finished than in reality. The practical purpose of adding a false-front to a commercial structure was to allow more space for merchandise display and signage. Because buildings in the early stages of a western town may look similar, as the primary building-type was a log cabin, it would be hard to distinguish the difference between a dry goods store, saloon, or private residence. A simple false-front on a log structure would allow the business owner to identify to potential customers the type of business it was, and thus increase sales. But there was another reason for the false-front. The false-front was a step in a new western town’s endeavor to become an established, successful, and civilized community. The false-front gives the appearance of an established town. This appearance was false because the side and rear elevations of these buildings would show the building to be a crude log structure. Many false-fronts followed architectural designs seen in other commercial buildings.75 This is evident in the McGovern Sisters’ store building which has a false-front in Greek Revival style, an architectural style that could be found in many cities and towns across the more developed northeast. But, the back of the McGovern Sisters’ store,

Figure 3.3 South and West Elevations of Kreamer-Goldberg-Strasberger complex, Notice the difference between the front elevations and the side elevation, with the side seen from the street more finished, Source: by Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
across the more developed northeast. But, the back of the McGovern Sisters’ store, which is away from the busy street, is drastically different, with no architectural detail, and an uneven and unfinished appearance (Figure 3.4). If a mining boom town matured past the phase of a mining camp then many of the commercial structures would be replaced with more permanent structures using architectural materials like brick and granite, and a real load bearing front elevation. The presence of buildings like the McGovern Sisters’ store building attest to Virginia City never reaching the status of a successful Western city, as the building was never replaced with a more substantial structure.

Inside, the building shows the remnants of Hannah and Mary McGovern’s decorative taste, and individualization of the space, to create an atmosphere that attracted women in Virginia City. Most of the current decorations, wall, and floor coverings were added by the McGovern sisters, and none of these were changed after they left in 1944. The ceilings of the building are cloth-lined, with exception of some of the shed or storage spaces. The building is noted as cloth-lined, according to Sanborn fire insurance maps, as early as 1884, as are most other log commercial buildings on Wallace Street, which was likely mentioned due to the fact that they were a fire risk. The practical purpose of cloth-lined ceilings was to eliminate dirt falling from the log ceilings, but also to simulate the look of plaster on the ceiling, in an

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76 Sanborn fire insurance maps, Virginia City, Montana, 1907-1922
Figure 3.4 North (rear) elevation of Kreamer-Goldberg-Strasberger Complex looking north, notice the uneven and unfinished appearance, Source: by Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.

attempt to make the log buildings look more finished and refined than they actually were. The McGovern sisters’ must have thought that creating a refined environment within their home and store outweighed the fire risk. The walls of the building have several layers of wall paper on them, with the shed area unfinished, and some walls painted white. It is unclear how many layers of the wallpaper can be attributed to the McGovern sisters’, as wallpaper was inexpensive and sometimes used as an insulator layer in other buildings within Virginia City. Buildings in the town are found to have
scrapped together any available material to insulate and decorate their buildings, such as the Susan Marr house on Idaho St., where the layers of floor and wall coverings seem infinite. The McGovern sisters’ added new wallpaper at least three times as is evidenced by comparing three historic photos of the commercial area of the building, the first c. 1909 (Figure 1.8), the second in 1923 (Figure 3.5), and the last in c. 1930 (Figure 3.6). The way that the McGovern sisters’ chose to decorate their building shows that they were committed to current styles and home decoration expectations as a means of demonstrating their middle class respectability, though they had to decorate within financial and special constraints.

The interior of the McGovern sisters store building is divided into two different spaces, one public, the other private. The eastern front two rooms, where the store was located, were public spaces constructed to attract and provide comfort for the store’s customers. The rest of the rooms in the building were private, and designed to facilitate the McGovern sisters’ needs and household tasks. The McGovern sisters’ outside image of respectability and good taste must have been in conflict with the building in which they operated, which was a rough log cabin whose more refined
Figure 3.5 Hannah McGovern in her store, c. 1923. Source: McGovern Dry Goods Store Collection, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana.
Figure 3.6 Mary McGovern in her store, c. 1930. Source: McGovern Dry Goods Store Collection, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana.
elements like the plaster ceiling and false front were fake. Despite this conflict, the sisters’ were able to create a comfortable home and attractive store.

**Public Space**

The eastern front room was where the store was located, where customers would enter, and what they would be able to see from looking into the window from the street. In the front room, there is merchandise stacked high on open shelves along the walls with two large display and work cabinets on both the west and east sides. Large windows on the south wall allow in natural light, as well as being a window into the store from the street. The wallpaper is attractive, but conservative, a striped design with gold top border. There is little other adornment on the walls in this room, with the focus of the set-up being to display goods. Though most items were put there by the McGovern sisters, some were placed there later when Charles Bovey changed the store for a museum exhibit. When comparing the store as it is today with surviving historic photographs of the store from 1909, 1923, and 1930, the store in its current appearance is an accurate portrayal of the original store. The shelving and display cases were the same and in the same location, and many of the items on the shelf are similar to the 1930 picture. But the style of many of the dress goods displayed in the central area of the store seems to be more Victorian than is shown in the 1930 photo. The store set-up may have been changed and added upon to match more closely with the c. 1909 McGovern store, with the hanging of bloomers, corsets, and nightwear, copied from the 1909 photo, while trying to keep the store in its final appearance.

The display of goods in the store is a mix between the modern and traditional display techniques (Figure 3.7). Most of the items are displayed in a
Figure 3.7 Perspective of west and north walls of store, Source: by Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
traditional way, with many items in bulk packaging and in boxes on shelves, so that customers need to ask for assistance to view the item. To purchase, the customer then would choose the amount they wished, and the sales person would retrieve it, and likely give the item to the customer in little to no packaging. The modern display techniques includes using glass cases for display of some of the items, cardboard display cases that would have been sent to them by manufacturers, as shown in the 1930 photo, and dresses on a rack for customers to browse. The glass case displays made the items more attractive to the customer, and highlighted certain goods. Putting items in cardboard displays, or on racks, allowed the customers to view and retrieve some of their own items. The sisters understood that their display of goods was an important aspect of selling products, and designed the display of goods accordingly.

Through a wide open doorway on the north wall, is a smaller room that had multiple uses, including a fitting room, parlor, and “rest room” (Figure 3.8). The room contains several items of furniture including a couch, chair, and ornate dresser with a larger mirror. The room is decorated in gold patterned wallpaper, with a few prints on the wall, and a large ornate Kalamazoo stove near the center of the room. Currently there is a mannequin with a dress and hat, as well as a few other clothing items. Though some of this room could have been adjusted by Bovey, the furniture in the room, and the location of it is very similar to the way this room appears in the historic photographs. By taking a closer look at the 1930 photo of the McGovern sisters’ store, many details of this room are visible. It is furnished in a similar way as it is now, with the rocking chair, the ornate stove, a framed print on the wall and the edge of a cushioned chair or couch. Any dress goods store would require a fitting area
Figure 3.8 Perspective of west and north walls of fitting room, Source: by Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
for getting measurements, and it was likely that this back room would have been used for that purpose.

This room also served social purposes, one of which was as a “rest room” for women traveling long distances to shop in Virginia City. A rest room during the early twentieth century was a remnant of the early twentieth century agricultural reform movement, whose purpose was both to provide a place of relaxation for women who visited country towns, as well as “encouraging the development of a consumer ethic among rural women and enhancing the reliance of rural women on commercial services available in local county seats.”

Though the McGovern sisters’ store was not a rest room created by persons within the rural reform movement, it did provide the service of relaxation for women visiting town. Also, placing a relaxation area within the store encouraged a consumer ethic, as it was within a consumer centered environment, and a visit there was most likely be combined with purchases in the store. The McGovern sisters’ store was important in creating a place for female relaxation and socialization in Virginia City.

This room likely also served as the McGovern sisters’ parlor. The parlor was “a room intended for the purposes of formal social life as middle class people understood it.”

Households set aside a room for the parlor, usually one at the front

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of the house near the entrance, which would be as lavishly decorated as possible, to be used when company came to visit. Those who did not have the ability to have a room set aside as a parlor within their home would often still have a parlor space, but it may not have been its own designated room. This room would have been the ideal space for a parlor, as they could devote their resources both towards decorating a room that would both benefit their shop and as well as their social respectability. This room would also be at the entrance way into the McGovern sisters’ private spaces, thus allowing them to adhere to the Victorian ideal “that public and private spaces were clearly defined and separated from one another as much as possible.”

Found in this room, on a small wooden table with a lace cloth is a photograph album, which is placed next to a large bible (Figure 3.9). It is not clear how the photos in the album are related to the sisters, but most of the photos are labeled with a name, and inserted into the openings in the album. This is a common way that a photograph album would have been displayed where “the album, like the bible, was part of the setting of a middle class parlor. That the album was displayed in the parlor illustrates its significance as a marker of gentility and as a prop for social interaction.”

A poem titled “The Family Photograph Album”, by Mary Small Wagner, found in one of the...
Figure 3.9 View of table with Bible and photo album.
scrapbooks shows that the McGovern sisters’ recognized the importance of photo albums.

A fund with information Blest,
To entertain the bashful guest,
when we’ve discussed the weather;
Bestowed from Grandma as a treat,
Our childish joy was quite complete
when viewing it together.

... Good, bad indifferent, grave or gay –
Some long since dead, some far away,
Of various aims and ages;
Destined through scattered years to meet
In family unity complete,
Within these yellowed pages.81

Through a creative use of space within the McGovern sisters’ store they were able to create at least three uses in one room, a fitting room, a restroom, and a parlor.

Private Space

The McGovern sisters’ followed a common shop formation, using the rest of the rooms in this building as their home and private space. The rest of the building has fewer surviving belongings of the McGovern sisters than the shop areas do. When the sisters left to return to the family ranch in 1944, they likely took some of their personal items. Also, Mary McGovern’s heirs, likely removed some items from the building after Mary’s death in the 1950s, and Charles Bovey moved some of the items

81 McGovern Sisters Scrapbook collection, The Family Photograph Album, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana
in the house to use in other exhibits. Remaining objects and a process of elimination help to determine the room’s uses and significance.

Through the door on the east wall of the fitting room, there is a hallway with open shelves on the west and east walls and a large cabinet on the north side of the west wall (Figure 3.10). This room was a passageway between the business and residential areas. The room seems to be utilized as a storage area, as it was too small for most other uses. Several objects remain in this room. On the left side of the door on the west wall there is a map of the North American continent from the western farmer’s almanac. Then, to the right of the door, there hangs an advertisement poster titled “’Flor De Baltimore’ Finest Cigar on the Market”, with the center having a print of chicks inside of a hat, in the middle of a grassy node, and then the authors’ name J. E. Oppenheimer, Butte, Montana (Figure 3.11). The only item left on the shelf is a large American flag, rolled up and laid upon the bottom shelf on the east wall. The map and poster are both advertisements that the McGovern sisters’ may have received for free as small business owners, and that they then utilized as decorative pieces. The cigar advertisement may have been sent to another store owner in Virginia City, and given to the sisters, or placed there later by Charles Bovey. Wholesalers would often give free merchandise to small business owners as it “added credibility to a product’s quality in an era that thrived on testimonial advertising.” The subject of baby

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82 Arata, “Embers of the Social City,” 144.

Figure 3.10 View of north wall of hallway, Source: by Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
Figure 3.11 “Flor De Baltimore” on west wall in Hallway.
chicks in the advertisement has little to do with cigars, and does not fit the masculine image of cigars. However, The baby chicks would be a more popular subject with women, and a print that would be hung in a female space could expose their product to a new group.

Through the door on the north wall, there is a large room that served as a kitchen (Figure 3.12). The walls are covered in crisp yellow wallpaper with white flowers, a chair rail and below that white wainscoating which consists of wooden boards simulating beadboard. On the north wall there is a door leading onto the porch, and on each side of the door there is a window. The floor is covered with linoleum in a multi-colored geometric pattern. The items currently in the room are a Kalamazoo stove, a large wooden cabinet, a few kitchen chairs, a small table, a bucket, a hand-scrubbing board, a homemade mop, coal shovels and a built-in cabinet on the west wall with plates, a teapot, and a mason jar. Through a door on the north wall, there is a kitchen pantry (Figure 3.13). Though a work and storage space, this room has a flowered wall paper border along the walls. There is a small window on the east wall, and on the west wall there is open shelving with a work counter. Still hanging on the east wall is a house dress, an item sold in the store in the 1930s, and both Hannah and Mary are seen wearing a similar dress in photos taken of them within the store c. 1930. It is likely most of these items were the McGovern sisters’, as Charles Bovey would commonly only change a space if it was going to be on view to the public, he wanted to move its item to another area, or used the room as storage.

The McGovern sisters’ lived and performed their housework without many ‘modern’ conveniences. There was electricity in the building when the
Figure 3.12 View of East Wall of Kitchen.
Figure 3.13 View of west wall of kitchen pantry, notice the water spout that provided the only source of running water in the building, Source: Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
McGovern sisters lived there but that seems to be the only ‘modern’ convenience that they had. There was one spout of running water in the whole building, located in the pantry off of the kitchen. There is no bathroom in the building, and it may be supposed that they used one of the outhouses that remain today in the rear of the Kreamer/McGovern/Strasberger commercial complex. A telephone was not found among the remaining contents in the building, and there is no evidence of a telephone line being connected to the building. The only stoves used for heat and cooking in the house are coal or wood burning stoves, not gas. Home improvements such as indoor plumbing and bathrooms, telephones, gas stoves, etc. were becoming increasingly common in American homes during the early twentieth century. But these conveniences took a long time to filter into all American households, creating “a gap between urban and rural standards of living.” This was partly due to access to modern technology, but members of rural communities sometimes chose not to modernize at the same pace as those in urban communities and instead were “innovative consumers in creating versions of rural modernity based on the way in which they chose to use (or not use),” modern conveniences.84 The McGovern sisters’ may have been selective about how they wanted to modernize, and had a combination of older and newer technologies instead of many expensive energy consuming appliances. Though there are electric lights in the building, they are not in every room, meaning that the McGovern sisters probably still used other forms of light like gas lanterns. Though indoor plumbing and a bathroom was not installed in the house, a water spout was added off of the kitchen in the pantry to end “the onerous and seemingly endless

84 Kline, Consumers in the Country, 178.
women’s task of carrying buckets of water from a pump or well in the yard into the house.”\textsuperscript{85} They continued to use the coal and wood burning stoves, likely saving money both on the purchase of gas or electric appliances, and the expense of gas. Instead of using an ice box, they used the shed off the back of the Weston Hotel as cold storage. Despite having limited resources, the McGovern sisters were able to selectively add some modern conveniences to ease housework.

The McGovern sisters likely gardened as a way to provide themselves with some fruits and vegetables, and supplement their income. Through the door on the north wall of the kitchen, there is a small wooden porch, and beyond the porch is a yard which is scattered with several outbuildings (Figure 3.14). The McGovern sisters did not own all of this space, but it was owned by the other business owners within the three shop commercial block, as well as by others that were not connected to the Kreamer/McGovern/Strasberger complex. Part of this space was owned by the McGovern sisters, and likely utilized for a garden, since the McGovern sisters’ occasionally sold vegetables to customers as recorded in their account book. The sisters also kept scrap books, which remain in the store area of the building. Included in the scrapbook entries are clippings about canning and gardening. One article, from \textit{Ladies Home Journal} is titled, “Garden pleasures and Garden Troubles,” gives advice about what to plant in June and how to protect your garden against insects.\textsuperscript{86} The McGovern sisters likely grew and canned their own vegetables, and stored them either

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{85} Danbom, \textit{Born in the Country}, 165.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{86} McGovern Scrapbook Collection, “Garden Pleasures and Garden Troubles,” \textit{Ladies Home Journal}, 1907, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana}
Figure 3.14 Site plan of Kreamer-Goldberg-Strasberger complex and Driggs outbuildings, Source: by Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
in the cold storage area, or in the pantry off the kitchen. The sisters’ followed a common practice among rural women of supplementing their food and maximizing their other income by growing and storing some of their own food.

Very few belongings remain in the portion of the building that used to be the Weston Hotel. The northwest room, through the door on the west wall in the kitchen, has thin white board covering the walls, with older wallpaper underneath, and on the north wall there is a stove pipe hole, showing that the room was heated at one time (Figure 3.15). Linoleum in a geometric pattern covers the floor. The door on the north walls lead down three steps into a cold storage area, with a window on the north wall, and a door leading outside on the east wall. This room has little finish, with exposed wooden boards, and a plain wooden floor. The last two rooms were most likely Hannah and Mary’s bedrooms. The west central room has pink, flowered wallpaper on the east wall, and white painted vertical wooden board on the west wall. The room has no windows, though there are three doors on the north, east and south walls. The ceiling in this room is one of the only rooms in the building which does not have a cloth ceiling. There is a stove pipe hole on the south wall, a sky light in the north portion of the ceiling possibly to give light into the room since it does not have any other natural light. The next room has white walls, and a checkered linoleum floor, with a door on the south wall that leads to Wallace Street. This last room has a rocking chair in it, and a small curtain over the door on the north elevation (Figure 3.16). According to the historic photo from c. 1930, this rocking chair looks similar to one in the front right corner of the photo, and in the store area. It can be assumed that these areas were used as the sisters’ bedrooms as they are the only areas in the building.
Figure 3.15 View of north wall of second bedroom, Source: Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
Figure 3.16 View of south wall of third bedroom, Source: Center for Historic Architecture and Design staff, 2009; Courtesy of Center for Historic Architecture and Design, Newark, DE.
that do not have a more definite use due to the furniture in the room. Also, the room shape and location, with narrow rooms that open into one another, make them better used for personal space than commercial space.

The bedroom areas would have been the most private and personal spaces within the McGovern store building for the McGovern sisters. The McGovern sisters left behind several scrapbooks which are found today in the store area of the building. It is not clear which sister created these scrapbooks as there is no name written on them, and it is possible that one or both were responsible for them. The scrapbooks date, as determined by dates on newspaper clippings, between 1896 and 1930. The scrapbooks that the McGovern sisters’ created use two types of book. The first are bound trade catalogs, likely sent to them by wholesalers for the sisters’ to order products from, which pages were covered over with various newspaper clippings. The second are made using mass produced albums made for the purpose of creating scrapbooks.

Scrapbooking was a common activity for women in the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. The McGovern sisters’ followed a common practice in their scrapbooking to “construct an idealized life by isolating a set of values that,” they found around them.\(^87\) The scrapbooks contain poetry, beauty and social advice, recipes, gardening and canning advice, fashion, short stories, local news, national news, and information about British royalty and American presidents. These

books also provided a reading source for the sisters’ at a time when books could be inaccessible due to cost and availability. Most importantly, these scrapbooks give a glimpse into the sisters’ personal life, and some of their sentiments and priorities.

One collection within the scrap books are several advertisements for mail-order houses during the 1900’s (Figure 3.17). The sisters may not have been satisfied with their living conditions, with being women in their late 30’s that had previously always lived under someone else’s roof, either their father’s, or that of their employer, Mrs. O. D. French. Never having your own home was not uncommon for unmarried women in the early twentieth century, but the prevalence of consumer culture may have created a desire for them in one of the McGovern sisters. Advertisements of mail order houses are not found after 1909, when Hannah McGovern purchased and owned the store, thus giving the sisters’ their own home to command. These entries also suggest that the sisters had a long-term plan to own their own home, and possibly run their own store. They may have been saving for years to gain independence, but when Mrs. O. D. French passed away, they took the opportunity to operate the dress goods store.

The scrapbooks show that the sisters adhered to Victorian gender stereotypes and expectations, at the same time that they were enjoying their freedom as independent women. The sisters grew up in the time of “separate spheres” for men and women, but during the early twentieth century, the women’s suffrage movement was in full swing, rebelling against Victorian social restrictions. The McGovern sisters did not follow normal female roles, choosing to become business women instead of wives and mothers. A “New Woman” was introduced during the early
Figure 3.17 an advertisement for “The Pilgrim” mail-order home, Source: McGovern Scrapbooks, McGovern Collection, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana.
twentieth century, and this new woman was “a woman who made her own choices.”

A poem in the scrapbook titled, “When She’ll Wish She Wasn’t New,” shows that the McGovern sisters were not interested in becoming this new woman, as it would have them lose some of their social rights.

When her duty’s manifolded,
And her hours of ease are few,
Will a change come o’er the spirit
Of the woman who is “new?”

... When no man e’er gives his seat up
In a car, or designs to hold
Her umbrella when it’s raining,
Won’t she wish that she was “old?”

... When man’s reverence no longer
Is accorded as her due,
When he treats her as a brother,
She’ll be sorry that she’s new! 

This negative portrayal of the “new woman” “reflected massive shifts in the ways Americans viewed gender, gender roles, and women’s opportunities at the turn of the 20th century.” The McGovern sisters though, seem to be comfortable with their position as unmarried women. There are several clippings which deal with unmarried

88 Woodsworth-Ney, Women in the American West, 179.

89 McGovern Sisters scrapbook collection, When She’ll Wish she Wasn’t New, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana

90 Woodsworth-Ney, Women in the American West, 179
women, one titled “A Guide to Happiness for Old Maids”, by Dorothy Dix. The poem discusses how women who accept “spinsterhood” can have a much happier existence than a married woman. Spinsterhood is an existence where, “she says what she thinks and believes what she likes, and no man edits her opinions, for even in this life she has passed into a terrestrial paradise in which there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage.” The scrapbooks reveal that the sisters may have adhered and respected Victorian gender roles, but also enjoyed the freedom in being business women.

Conclusion

The story of the McGovern sisters’ and the McGovern store building is a story of perseverance and innovation in the face of change. When many Virginia City buildings were disappearing and residents were leaving for better prospects in other western cities, the McGovern sisters and their building stayed. In a male-dominated society and mining culture, the McGovern sisters carved out a space, both for themselves and for other women that was distinctly feminine, and women-controlled. Despite living within a rough log structured in a dwindling mining town, the

91 Dorothy Dix was the pen name for early twentieth century, female journalist, Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer. Gilmer wrote for several magazines and newspapers, as well as writing seven books, but was best known for her weekly advice columns, and as a suffragist. for more information see, Barbara Sicherman, et all, Notable American Women, (Radcliff College, 1980), 275-276.

McGovern sisters pooled the resources that they had available to create a home similar to the ideal home as portrayed in *Ladies’ Home Journal* and other women’s magazines of the time. The McGovern sisters were innovative when it came to their business, and they were able to adapt to and institute modern business practices and ideas to keep their store in operation.
Chapter 4

SERVING THE WOMEN OF VIRGINIA CITY WITH TRADITIONAL AND MODERN BUSINESS PRACTICES

Mass consumerism during the early twentieth century in the United States started in large cities in the Northeast and filtered west into smaller rural communities like Virginia City. This new consumerism involved consumption where products were made en masse in factories, and sold in department stores, variety stores, or mail order catalogs, as opposed to small privately owned businesses like country stores, dressmakers, and tailors. The customer focus of this consumerism was women, as they were thought to be most concerned with purchasing items for their homes and families. During this period women began to purchase their clothing ready-made as opposed to buying them from a dressmaker, or making it themselves. It also became normal during the first half of the twentieth century for Americans to purchase more than they ever had before, even within lower economic classes. This modern way of buying and selling goods did not, however, impact those in rural communities in the same way. Rural communities were more rooted in tradition and frugality than their urban counterparts, as well as not having the same accessibility to goods. The McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store records show that consuming in rural
environments was an adaption of mass consumption practices to fit the needs of local consumers and accessibility to goods. This paper links the store’s account books to census records to uncover how the McGovern sisters changed their operation in response to the changing business environment in Virginia City, identifying the range of traditional and modern consuming practices at the store.

Business declined for the McGovern sisters’ between the 1909-1925 period and the 1926-1944 period. Though prices of consumer goods normally would have increased during a 35-year period, they appear to have decreased at the McGovern sisters’ store, going from an average of $1.47 to $1.37 (Table 4.1). This is likely because the residents of Madison County were not able to afford a rise in prices, and so the McGovern sisters could not raise their prices and still attract those customers. The customers were also shopping at the store less frequently, with the number of customers listed in the account book going from 155 for the 1909 to 1926 period to 65 between 1926 and 1944. There was also a decrease in frequent customers, or those who visited the store 20 or more times during the time period, with 38 frequent customers for 1909-1944, and 9 frequent customers for 1926-1944 (Table 4.2). This is likely due to the population decline in Virginia City since most of the frequent shoppers were also Virginia City residents. The McGovern sisters’ store was
becoming less busy, and was serving a smaller population at the end of the store’s operation. These changes likely instigated the changes at the store.

Table 4.1 Price of Items at the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store, Virginia City, Montana, 1909-1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1909-1925</th>
<th>1926-1944</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>$1.47</td>
<td>$1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>$6.00</td>
<td>$11.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>$0.05</td>
<td>$0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 Customer Visits, McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store, Virginia City, Montana, 1909-1944

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1909-1925</th>
<th>1926-1944</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to maintain operation of a successful business during difficult economic times, the McGovern sisters adopted a combination of traditional and modern commercial practices. Traditional practices were familiar and expected in a small community like Virginia City, where most people knew each other. The McGovern sisters drew on this appeal of the traditional or old fashioned by
maintaining close personal relationships with customers, offering a variety of methods for payment (including barter and long-term credit), and by advertising their store in the local paper, The Madisonian. Despite the appeal and expectation of the traditional, the McGovern sisters also needed to compete with other stores and mail order catalogs, which they did by adopting modern commercial practices for displaying merchandise, ordering items from fashion magazines and mail order catalogs, and offering more ready-made items for sale.

The organization of the account books is traditional and included two sections, one for everyday purchases, and a second for accounts of regular customers (Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3). Most customers would be listed under their name, which was important because it would allow the sisters or their family to collect from someone in the case of something like a death. As long time members of the Virginia City community, the McGovern sisters likely had a closer relationship with the customers than just buyer and seller, than a mail order catalog or large department store would. This personal connection was something lost in modern consuming where purchasers would either order things through a catalog with little interaction with the seller, or purchase the item at a large store within a city, where they would often not know most of the other customers and employees with whom they interacted at the store. Personal connections were a common way for women to build up businesses in small rural
Figure 4.1 McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store Account book, 1910. Source:
McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store Account book, 1909-1911,
McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana.
communities. Nell O’Brien O’Malley, from Big Sandy, Montana, a small rural town like Virginia City, who ran a hair salon, started by fixing friends and neighbor’s hair, which then expanded into a business, growing her clientele through people telling other people.\(^\text{93}\) Personal connections were a way that the McGovern sisters built and maintained their customer base.

In the margins of the account book, and in a short diary written by one of the sisters which was found in the shop, there are a few diary entries discussing the weather, births, deaths, marriages, and visits. The diary dates between 1924-1925, and is written on pages from a notebook produced by Finch, Van Slyck, and McConville, a Saint Paul wholesaler, with advertisements on the left sides, and a space for a ‘shopping list’ on the right (Figure 4.4). Several of the names in these diary entries are also names found within the account book, showing that many of these people had close, personal relationships with the McGovern sisters. Mrs. Flora McNulty, a customer, is found several times in the diary entries, always in connection to a visit. On July 14, 1925, “Mrs. Tom Duncan and Mrs. Ellen Weber, and Mrs. McNulty called for a few min. Mrs. Duncan and Mrs. Weber are from Long Beach,

\(^{93}\) Laurie K. Mercier, “Montanans at Work: Businesswomen in Agricultural Communities,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 40.3, (Summer, 1990), 78.
Figure 4.4 McGovern sister diary, 1924. Source: McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store collection, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana.
In the second diary written between 1923 and 1924, in another Finch, Van Slyck, and McConville notebook, three customers are listed as visiting, “8 of Aug. 1924. Mrs. Wonderley and Mrs. W. Blanche and a Miss McCorley called.”

‘Visiting’ stems from the Victorian era, where women would visit each other in a formal manner, with the reason due more to social expectations, than to friendships. The McGovern sisters and others in Virginia City appear to have kept this practice, shown with the McGovern sisters diary entries outlining who ‘visited’ and when. The social significance of visiting is present in The Madisonian, where a weekly social column outlined who visited whom around Virginia City. The McGovern sisters’ store was likely a popular place for women in the area to visit, a location where women could look at fashions, both in store, and in the sisters’ large collection of magazines. In the margin of the account book for 1933-1944, a death of a frequent customer is listed as, “Cora Gilbert died May 12, 1944, was buried May 14th.”

Drawing on these personal connections was expected at a country store, as well as an instrumental way for the McGovern sisters to build up their business, and sustain customer loyalty during tough economic times.

94 McGovern sister, Diary 2, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, MT, 13.
95 McGovern sister, Diary 1, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, MT, 21.
96 McGover Sisters’ Dry Goods Store 1933-1944 account book, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, MT.
Bartering is an old practice, and one of the only places that this practice continued in the United States into the early twentieth century was in rural communities. Bartering for goods helped the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store compete with mail order catalogs because customers could only purchase items in the catalogs with cash. Bartered items are listed throughout the account books, though only a few customers regularly engaged in the practice. Bartered goods included milk, wood, and produce, in exchange for a variety of items within the store. Laura Rank, the wife of a miner, regularly bartered milk for dress goods like corsets, cloth, hose and spools of thread, with the McGovern sisters between July 1913 and July 1914. This was likely a side activity for Laura Rank started in order to supplement her family’s income, allowing for the purchase of more consumer goods. At least four customers paid occasionally with cords of wood over long periods, one as long as seven years. Mrs. Eva Sauerbier, wife of a grocery clerk, occasionally paid with wood over a four year period. Wood would have been very important to the McGovern sisters as it was a primary source of fuel for heating and cooling, especially important during Montana’s harsh winters. Bartering allowed the McGovern sisters’ to widen the customer base for the store, as well as obtaining important goods that the McGovern sisters’ needed.
Long-term credit was another way that the McGovern sisters kept their goods accessible to many women in Madison County, and was another amenity that mail-order catalogs did not offer. Credit has been around for centuries where “all merchants – large and small, male and female, wholesale and retail – granted their customers credit, often for a period as long as six months.”97 This was being done differently in department stores and mail order catalogs in the early twentieth century. In department stores, especially before the 1920s, a store credit account was difficult to get as “managers saw it as a privilege to be awarded to elites and members of the solid middle class.”98 In the 1910s, the Sears and Roebuck Catalog started extending credit “on the basis of four pieces of information – length of time at present location, occupation, and two references – Sears attracted many middle-income and professional people.”99 These new types of credit lines often included interest, raising the price of purchases. The McGovern sisters used the more traditional type of credit lines, which were usually repaid within six months. Most of the customers used credit at some point, with credit most likely being granted on the basis of the McGovern sisters’ familiarity with the person, rather than their economic or social status. They


granted credit to those most likely of the ‘solid middle class’ like Mrs. Hustead, wife of the county commissioner, as well as to those of a lower economic group like Mary Trout, a single woman laundress with two young children. These credit lines do not appear to have interest attached to them, meaning the price of goods did not rise when using credit. Though the mail order catalogs were able to offer a wider variety of goods than the McGovern sisters’ store could, they were not able to offer the same credit lines, something that seemed to be much needed given the frequency of its use by most customers at the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store.

Though it is probable that the McGovern sisters were trained in making dresses, the store was not a dressmaker’s shop, but rather a dress goods store. Dresses were purchased, they are an infrequently purchased item. Also, the dresses must have been fairly simple as they were not expensive, for example two calico dresses purchased by Mrs. Victor Kreamer in April of 1913 cost only $2.00. This was much less than what was found in the Sears catalog, where the average dress in the 1920s would cost at least $10, and then would have to be altered to fit individual shapes.\(^{100}\) Dress goods included items used in making clothing like cloth, thread, needles,


trimming, pins, needles, buttons, etc. Along with selling dress goods, the McGovern sisters also sold other female dress items. These included different types of underwear, gloves, jewelry, dolls, hats, hose, make-up, perfume, scarves, aprons, house dresses, ready-made pants, etc. This variety likely helped the McGovern sisters’ business survive as long as it did. Having a dress made by a dressmaker was very expensive. Women could only afford, at the most, “one or two new dresses or bonnets – worn until hems frayed and feathers drooped – each season.” A dress goods store allowed women to ‘remake’ their old dresses, or sew their own clothing, which was much more affordable than buying a dress made by a dressmaker, or new ready-made clothing. Dress makers and milliners also needed a place in which to purchase their dress goods. Several dressmakers and milliners shopped frequently at the McGovern sisters’ store. Nellie Foreman, a milliner in 1910, visited the McGovern sisters’ store 27 times within a two-year period, likely buying goods like velvet, ribbon, spools of thread, pins, and lining in order to make hats. Selling dress goods provided women in Madison County with a more affordable way to produce their clothing, where they could repair and ‘remake’ old clothing, along with making their own.

The effect of mail order catalogs on Virginia City businesses in the early twentieth century is shown in advertisements and articles from *The Madisonian.*

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There were several fictitious characters in editorial comics in the newspaper, like Mr. Brown, a man who spends all his money at mail order catalogs and then looks up to find the shops on Main Street gone; Owen Moore, a business owner who has to leave town; and Mr. William Dollar, who spends his money at local businesses (Figure 4.5). These cartoons were meant to warn citizens that spending money outside their local communities, especially with mail-order catalogs, would cause many of the town’s businesses to close, and leave them with a weak economy.

The McGovern sisters used mail order catalogs as a way to bolster their business, thus decreasing their threat. A mail order catalog that the McGovern sisters’ regularly subscribed to, and appear to have heavily used is *The Delineator* which in addition to having short stories, practical advice, and self help articles, also had pages of the latest fashions, and patterns available for mail order.103 Notes in the margins of the magazines reveal what the McGovern sisters may have ordered and used. Some notes show that the McGovern sisters’ may have been making some of the patterns with notes like “4 ½ yd. small pleats,” on a pattern called “No. 8615 Princess Dress”.104 Other notes indicate these patterns were ordered for customers, like on a


103 Arata, “Embers of the Social City,” 146.

104 *The Delineator*, September 1916 (Butterick Publishing Company) McGovern Collection, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana.
Figure 4.5 “Mr. Brown of Shopless Town,” from The Madisonian, August 29, 1907, Source: Arata, “Embers of the Social City,” 124.
skirt, pattern 6624, where there was a calculation for the price of twelve copies of the pattern. Mail-order catalogs could also assist small business owners in obtaining the items that their customers desired.

Found in the store are a number of other fashion and women’s magazines like *Ladies Home Journal*. Several of these magazines were found on a shelf in the store area, suggesting that they were available to customers. Women’s magazines during the early twentieth century would give women the latest fashions at the same time as dispensing moral advice. *Ladies Home Journal* and other similar magazines targeted women who were in Madison County, Montana, or “white native-born, middle class women …who tried to find a comfortable role in the rapidly changing world of the expanding middle class.”

For example, women in places like Virginia City who read the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1912 found an article titled “Plain Country Woman” showing the evils of fashion, and then turning the page to find “What I see in New York,” an article outlining the latest city styles. This was consistent with these women’s issues in shopping where “a woman would certainly try

105 *The Delineator*, January 1914 (Butterick Publishing Company) McGovern Collection, McFarland Curatorial Center, Virginia City, Montana.

106 Other magazines found in the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store are: *The American Magazine, Farm and Fireside, Women”s Home Companion, The Ladies” Home Journal, People”s Popular Monthly, Farm Life, The Gentlewoman* and *Home Circle*.

to retain the simple family values advocated on one page and still want to dress her
daughter in the most up to date attire consistent with her age and social group.\textsuperscript{108}
The magazines would allow women to see what the latest fashions are, help them style the dresses that they would make themselves, and allow the McGovern sisters’ to use modern consuming ideals to their benefit.

It is also apparent that modern consumption influenced the McGovern sisters through the items that they sold in their store, as found in the account books and on the shelves. By looking at the McGovern sisters’ store’s current display, the “merchandise was out of date” but this does not seem to be accurate.\textsuperscript{109} The McGovern sisters did have a lot of out of date merchandise on their shelves, with many items that may have come to them from Mrs. O. D. French’s store stock. This included items like still corsets found in their original packaging on the shelves, but there were many items for sale there that would still be in demand during the 1940s when the store closed. The idea that the McGovern sisters’ store appears so outdated can be easily explained. Charles Bovey added items to the store to make it look older, so that its inventory would match other historic shop displays in the town dating to the gold rush era or the 1860’s. Many items sold at the McGovern sisters’ store were


\textsuperscript{109} Arata, “Embers of the Social City,” 133.
items regularly purchased by most American women in the early twentieth century like hose, dress goods, gloves, shoe strings, long underwear, etc. Some items though do not span the whole range of the account books, and are only found listed in the books when they would have been in style. Items found mostly in the earlier account books (1910’s and 1920’s) are corsets and hats. Into the 1920’s hats and corsets were socially expected clothing items for women. But as hats and corsets fade out of style, they are less frequently purchased. Only ten corsets and two hats were purchased between 1933-1936, and none after 1936. Beginning in 1915, ready-made house dresses become a popular item, continuing into the 1930’s. There were also items that only appear in the later period of the store, or after about 1925, like brassieres, panties, anklets, and bracelets. The outdated items may have stayed on the shelf due to the McGovern sisters’ knowledge of their customers who wanted older styles, like older women who still wore corsets into the 1930s and 1940s. The McGovern sisters’ also knew that women in rural Montana would not dress the same as women in New York City, and certain items needed to continue to be available in the store. One staple is long wool underwear (a necessity in Montana), which was sold from 1909 through the last years of the shop, and can still be found on the shelves today. Despite an outward appearance of being outdated, the McGovern sisters’ were aware of modern fashions and trends, and stocked their store accordingly.
The McGovern sisters appealed both to the traditional and modern attitudes of those in their community through their advertisements. Advertisements for their store are found in the local newspaper, *The Madisonian* mainly around 1913, when it was referred to as The Bazaar. One advertisement is headed with the “Old Fashioned Woman,” (figure 8) and discusses how the store will help customers be thrifty and that “you will find it pays to be an old fashioned woman in the buying sense – and this store will help you to practice grandmother’s policies.” These advertisements are appealing to a rural ideal of thrift, which values saving money or spending only when it is necessary. Though traditional practices were maintained, the McGovern sisters’ store was influenced by more modern forms of consuming. This is evident in other advertisements, which instead of focusing on thrift and tradition, as the “Old-fashioned woman” advertisement showed, highlight ideals coming from department stores in the north east which were concerned with the cult of the new and buying more goods than needed (Figure 4.6). These advertisements were in the same newspaper, *The Madisonian*, around the same time as the “Old-fashioned woman” advertisement. One advertisement notes that “new Spring line” will soon be

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available, encouraging people to come in and look at them. Other advertisements highlight popular products that the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store had in stock like “Parisiana Corsets” which come in “48 distinctive styles” and encourages the reader to “come in and see how it will give you graceful, slender, hipped lines, without you making the slightest effort.” (Figure 4.7) These advertisements show that the sisters’ recognized their customer’s interest in new modern products, despite purchasing the items in traditional ways.

These advertisements were a way for the McGovern sisters to compete with mail-order catalogs, and ready-made clothes from the Robert Vickers Company. The Robert Vickers Company was a general store, which sold dress goods and ready-made clothes as well as the McGovern sisters’ store, and was also located on Wallace Street in Virginia City. This store was the only other store in Virginia City which sold women’s dress goods. Vickers, like the McGovern sisters, tried to appeal to customer’s traditional notions, and limited budgets, while selling modern products. The main difference between Vickers and McGovern store advertisements is that the McGovern sisters’ appealed more personally to women in their advertisements than Robert Vickers did. The McGovern sisters reminded their customers, who were living

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in harsh economic and environmental conditions, that they were the ideal women of the twentieth century. Their advertisements targeted ‘old-fashioned’ women who ‘looketh well to the ways of her household’, were ‘dainty’, and had ‘individual figures’ and styles. Vickers, on the other hand, just stated that the goods were available, advertised women’s wear beside men’s and children’s, and used words like ‘matron’, and reminded them that ‘we cater to particular people,’ rather than appealing to women on a personal level (Figure 4.8, Figure 4.9).

Mail order catalog advertisements were very attractive, and would have been difficult for the McGovern sisters’ to compete with. The pages of the Sears catalog showed attractive models enjoying the latest fashions (Figure 4.10). Sears did not try to connect personally with their customers in their advertisements. Instead, the clothing, its price, and how to order are just presented to the customer, without an attempt to connect with the person viewing the pages, other than the expected admiration and desire for the attractive clothing. The McGovern advertisements attempted to reach out to their customers, and conveyed that they knew who they were, and what their individual needs and desires are in relation to dress goods. This was likely an attempt to compete with Sears advertisements that were just pages in the book, and products that came in the mail, rather than the shop owners who were important and well known persons in their community.
Conclusion
At a time when mass consumerism was changing customer expectations, and increasing business competition, the McGovern sisters found ways to keep their business in operation. The sisters did this by combining traditional business practices,
with modern ones developed by department store and mail-order companies. The sisters were savvy business owners, able to find ways to reach and serve their customers, and to stay in operation despite a rapidly declining economy.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

America’s west is full of rich, interesting and significant women’s stories, stories of interest to the American visiting public. Women in the American west came from many ethnic and social backgrounds, and their stories can serve to interest almost any visitor who may stop at any of the west’s many museums and historic sites. These stories are currently not utilized in full measure at museums and historic sites, leaving an important part of the America’s western history untold. Virginia City, Montana is a place that has many varied, fascinating and exciting women’s stories. Women in Virginia City were entrepreneurs, notorious historic characters, social changers, community organizers, as well as mothers, wives, and daughters. Interpreting women’s history should have a larger presence at museums and historic sites in the inter-mountain west, and the Montana Historical Commission is in a position to expand their interpretation of women’s history with the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store.
Women’s Interpretation

Although the lives of women form an important part of American western history, there are few historic sites that interpret this history in the intermountain region. Most museums do discuss women in their interpretive writing, but do not focus on women exclusively, or present women as having a different perspective or experience than men. Those few that do have spaces within their site or museum devoted to a female perspective. Nevada City, Virginia City’s sister historic site, uses live interpreters and reenactments along in their historic village. Many of the live interpreters are women, whose personas are based on historical women who lived either in Nevada City or Virginia City during the 1860’s -1870’s, allowing visitors to see the women’s roles in a western mining town. Montana’s Museum at the Montana Historical Society includes women’s perspectives in their interpretive panels. These are included in the exhibit titled “Montana Homeland,” which discusses Native American women’s experiences into twentieth-century Montana women’s home life and “explores the ways people interacted with the environment, and how their everyday activities reflected that interaction.”114 The Women of the West museum, part of the Autry Museum in Los Angeles, California’s goal is “to gain a new understanding, not simply of what women have done, but why it matters for the

West’s, past, present, and future.”\textsuperscript{115} This museum offers diverse exhibits on western women, both at their museum and online, and includes women from the intermountain western region. The absence of women’s history interpretation in the intermountain west makes an interpretation of the McGovern Sisters’ from a female perspective important.

The McGovern Sisters’ store can offer an alternative view of women’s history that is not often told, that of women as an important part of the towns and their families’ economy. There were women entrepreneurs on Main Streets across America, especially during the early twentieth century, but this history is not often interpreted or recognized.\textsuperscript{116} The McGovern sisters’ store currently does not focus on the fact that it was owned, operated, and visited almost exclusively by women. The A. and L. Tirocchi dressmakers’ project at the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD museum) was able to tell the story of working women and women entrepreneurs in Providence Rhode Island. Like the McGovern sisters, the Tirocchi sisters operated a dressmaking store in the early twentieth century. The bulk of their store, along with the account books, was found as the Tirocchis sisters’ had left it in the 1940s. The RISD museum tells their story through several themes, including


\textsuperscript{116} “Uncovering women entrepreneurs”, 202
fashion, their clients, Italian immigration, the sisters’ and their family, dressmaking, and the store’s employees. This project was shown in a small temporary exhibit at the RISD museum, but the full project is available online for viewing.\footnote{The A. & L. TIROCCHI DRESSMAKERS PROJECT, accessed. Feb. 21 2011, <http://tirocchi.stg.brown.edu/index.html>.
}

This project did not have the benefit of allowing visitors to see the exhibit in the building where the dress shop was, and preserving the objects as they were left. The McGovern sisters’ store can do this, allowing visitors to see and understand women’s economic significance in American towns and cities.

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Currently, most museums only attract about nine percent minority visitors. To stay current and relatable to the average public, museums need to find ways to attract minority visitors. Good museum interpretation practices dictate that the stories told at museums need to
relate personally to visitors and their experiences for a museum to have a lasting impact on visitors. Many women’s western stories could be utilized to personally relate to minority populations. Virginia City, Montana had several African American women business owners, such as Mrs. Bickford, owner of the waterworks and two African American women who operated a restaurant on Wallace Street and ran a boarding house and laundry business at the Coggswell-Taylor Cabins on Jackson Street. These women’s stories could entice more minority visitors to come to Virginia City and create a sustainable visitor base.

Women’s role in American society is changing, and the way women are included in the interpretation of museums and historic sites needs to change to reflect these new values. American women will be an important audience for museums to attract as they increasingly become college-educated; visitor studies have shown that the majority of museum audiences are college-educated visitors.119 Americans will expect equal gender representation in museum interpretation. It can be challenging to find women’s perspectives in historic sites, as much of history and historic documents were previously created by men, and thus tended to only show the male perspective of

history. Interpreting women’s history will require innovative historic research, as well as attention to other types of historic evidence like objects, diaries, and oral histories.

The McGovern Sisters’ Dress Goods Store interpretive exhibit can help to close the gap in the interpretation of women’s history. The story of the McGovern sisters and the women of Virginia City is the most appropriate theme to interpret in the building, as women shaped its current appearance. Visitors walking through Virginia City will see the image of the male-dominated western mining town, with the places discussing Montana’s vigilantes and saloons. The McGovern sisters’ store could be the one location that shows how women left their impressions on the landscape as well.

**Interpretive Plan for Store**

An interpretive plan of the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store should have two main focuses, first to show women’s economic importance in the Virginia City community and second to show women’s experiences in early twentieth century Virginia City. Women were and are an important part of the Virginia City economy, but this is not relayed to visitors thorough the current interpretation, which mainly consists of male-run businesses. The McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store is the ideal location in which to interpret this as it was run by women, as well as having many entrepreneurial Virginia City residents as customers as customers, such as brothel
owner Maggie Coleman and utility owner Sarah Bickford. Montana Heritage Commission would like to emphasize the layers of history in Virginia City, and this will be enhanced by interpreting the twentieth century history of Virginia City, the time between boom and preservation.

Currently, there is little interpretation at the McGovern Sisters Dry Goods Store with visitors viewing the store by looking into the windows on the front elevation, and a plaque from the National Register about the history of the building next to the front door. The recent renovations of the store are ideal for interpreting the store, and should be utilized. As before the Weston Hotel portion of the building is clear of any objects, with new glass half-doors blocking off the portions of the building which hold the objects left by the McGovern sisters. Also added, were glass coverings over exposed decorative and architectural elements. The Weston Hotel portion should be utilized as a place both for interpretive exhibits and panels, as well as a place from whilst visitors can get a closer look at the McGovern sisters store objects.

Interpretation of the McGovern Sisters’ store should include several elements, including informational panels, glass cases with objects, historical photos and reproductions of the scrapbooks and account books for visitors to peruse. As the Weston Hotel portion of the building is clear of objects, it will hold all of the
interpretive elements, with the store area, sitting room, and kitchen left as they are. There should be informational panels located near the exposed decorative and architectural elements. There should one panel which relates the entire history of the building, and one with biographies of the McGovern sisters’ and their family. The rest of the informational panels would use the store and its customers to show women’s economic importance to the Virginia City economy and women in twentieth century Montana. Since visitors cannot see objects in the store up-close, some store items could be placed in glass cabinets in the interpretive panel, and a large panel placed near the door where visitors view into the store area, which details a selection of objects from the store. Reproductions of the account and scrap books would be available for visitors to look through, to allow them to get an intimate look at the McGovern sisters.

The store exhibit should be self-guided, and could be part of a women’s history walking tour. The McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods store is one of many sites in Virginia City in which women’s history could be interpreted. A pamphlet could detail the sites and their history, with the McGovern store standing as the focal point of the tour, which ties the site together.
Conclusion

Women’s impressions on the landscape are not as apparent as their ability to move throughout and change their environment was limited due to social restrictions. Most western mining towns adhered to the ideal of “separate spheres” with a woman’s sphere being within the home, or in the private domain. The McGovern sisters’ store was possibly the only place in Virginia City where women controlled a public space.

The McGovern sisters made both a public/commercial and private/residential space within their building. The public space reflects the sisters’ need to create a comfortable environment to attract customers. The private space was created to suit the sisters’ needs, and reflected the sisters’ middle-class values. Being a multi-use space allows for a layered interpretation within one site, where visitors can both explore women in the public domain, and women in their homes.

The McGovern sisters were entrepreneurs that were able to deal with a changing business climate by adopting both modern and traditional business practices. The sisters were able to connect with their customers, and recognize their needs, both financially and desired styles. This allowed the sisters to keep the store in operation throughout the rest of their lives, with the store not closing until Hannah McGovern’s illness and death in 1945.
The McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store is the best location in Virginia City to interpret about women’s lives in a small western mining town in the early twentieth century. The sisters’ left behind more information about their daily lives than most women ever do. The women of Virginia City were able to create their own space a male-dominated environment and gain access to the consumer goods that they desired through the McGovern Sisters’ Dry Goods Store.
### Appendix A

**INVENTORY OF THE MCGOVERN SISTERS’ DRY GOODS STORE, 1909-1944**

<table>
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<th>Accordion</th>
<th>Brooch</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Anklet</td>
<td>Bust supporter</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apron</td>
<td>Buttons</td>
<td>Daisy cloth</td>
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<td>Calico</td>
<td>Darning</td>
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<td>Calico dress</td>
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<td>Denim</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Ball</td>
<td>Canvas</td>
<td>Dishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ball bearings</td>
<td>Cards</td>
<td>Dog</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cat</td>
<td>Doll</td>
</tr>
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<td>Chambray</td>
<td>Doll clothes</td>
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<td>Basket</td>
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<td>Dress shields</td>
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<td>Beading</td>
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<td>Dressing scarf</td>
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<td>Dye</td>
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<td>Fan</td>
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<td>Flannel</td>
</tr>
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<td>Bottle walnutte</td>
<td>Cotton Batten</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boxes</td>
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<td>Fleece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bra binding</td>
<td>Cretonne</td>
<td>Floss</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Brasserie</td>
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<td>Flowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Item</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briad</td>
<td>Cup and saucer</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Neck tie holder</td>
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<td>Needles</td>
<td>Sailor hat</td>
</tr>
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<td>Hair net</td>
<td>Nemo corset</td>
<td>Salt and Pepper shakers</td>
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<td>Hair rollers</td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>Sanitary belt</td>
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<td>Night robe</td>
<td>Sash pins</td>
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<td>Hankerchief</td>
<td>Notebook</td>
<td>Satchet</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Summer vest</td>
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<td>Tape</td>
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<tr>
<td>Underwear</td>
<td>Watches</td>
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APPENDIX B

EXAMPLE OF US CENSUS FOR VIRGINIA CITY, 1910, SHOWING MADAMS AND PROSTITUTES

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>COLOR</th>
<th>RELIGION</th>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>MARITAL STATUS</th>
<th>ADDRESS</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>123 Main</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>456 Elm</td>
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<td>Jack</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
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<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>Bob</td>
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<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
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<td>Sue</td>
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<td>Nurse</td>
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