

**WOMEN WON THE WEST**  
*by Jacquie Rogers*

A man of small stature arrived in rugged Owyhee County, Idaho Territory, in the early 1870s. Little Joe Monahan was his name, and mining was his game. He built himself a small cabin in Ruby City where he mined his nearby claim. Later, after a boom and a bust, he worked in the New York mill, and after that he raised chickens, hogs, and dairy cows, and sold meat and milk to the miners in Silver City.

Around 1880, Joe moved to Malheur County, Oregon, and got a job busting broncs and cowboying--one of the best around at lariat and firearms of any sort. Later, he moved to Succor Creek (back in Idaho Territory) where he built a small ranch and lived in a dugout. Many a papa urged their daughters to set their caps for him. He made a good living, was an honest man, and always made a point to vote--his duty, he said. But Joe never showed any interest in the ladies, and politely turned them away.

In January, 1904, Little Joe succumbed to pneumonia while driving his cattle to winter pasture along the Boise River. No one knew who to notify, but Joe had received letters from Buffalo, New York. A local rancher, Bill Schnabel, wrote a letter to the post office there.

Rockville, Owyhee County, Idaho  
January 6, 1904

Dear Sir:

There died near here a little man, known to all frontiersmen, such as miners, cowboys, etc., as Joe Monahan. He never revealed his identity and all cowboys respected him. He was a small, beardless man with hands, feet, stature, and voice of a woman. He never told a word to his best friends who he was or what he was. He often addressed letters to a Walters family in Buffalo, and possibly has relatives there.

Now poor Joe is dead, and the long and deep mystery is cleared up. He is a woman. He has fought his way through with many of us, suffering hardships and hunger, but never whimpering. He made money once in the mines and lost all, then started again in cattle raising. The cowboys treated him with utmost respect, and he was always welcome to eat and sleep at their camps. Joe was always recluse, kept his door bolted while in his dugout and seldom invited a visitor in.

He has quite a bit of property in cattle and a few horses. If anyone knows the whereabouts of any remaining heirs in Buffalo, please contact me.

Sincerely yours,  
Wm. Schnabel

Little Joe Monahan spent nearly fifty years working at the roughest jobs, in the roughest land, and earned the respect of the roughest men. Not one of them suspected Joe was a woman.

It turns out that Johanna Monahan's mother had died, leaving her with her abusive stepfather. At the age of fourteen, the Walters family adopted her but she left after a few years to seek her fortune in the west.

Not long after she was buried, a man from California sent a letter to the

postmistress, Mrs. Libby Proud, attempting to locate his mother, Josephine Monahan.  
Joe was not a proper Victorian lady.

*Jacquie Rogers grew up in Owyhee County and has written a couple of western romances set there. This article was researched from the works of Mildretta Adams, the Owyhee County historian until her death in 1987. Her sources are letters, newspaper articles, pictures, and a lot of listening to the accounts of old-timers. She was a good friend of Jacquie's parents, and they spent many hours listening to Mildretta and her husband, Walt, talk about the way it was. You can find more information in "Historic Silver City: The Story of the Owyhees," copyright 1969. Booklets on various subjects may be purchased from the Owyhee County Museum, Murphy, Idaho, although many are out of print..*