

# Arizona Women

## Weird, Wild, and Wonderful

Dee Strickland Johnson

Foreword by Margo Metegrano

Illustrations by the Author



Arizona Women—Weird, Wild, and Wonderful  
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# Dedication

## **To the women**

*of Arizona's past, whose lives, with all their  
happiness, sorrow, courage, persistence,  
determination, accomplishments, failures  
and mistakes, have inspired me to write  
about them —*

*and to those who are native to the state —  
and those who have wisely decided to  
make Arizona their own —*

*and to those yet to come*

*I lovingly dedicate this book.*

---

*Women of the West:*

*"Whether right or wrong, your spirit*

*Knew not the word of fear--*

*And 'tis the dauntless courage of your kind*

*That bred the pioneer."*

*. . . Jack Thrope*

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## Notes on the drawings:

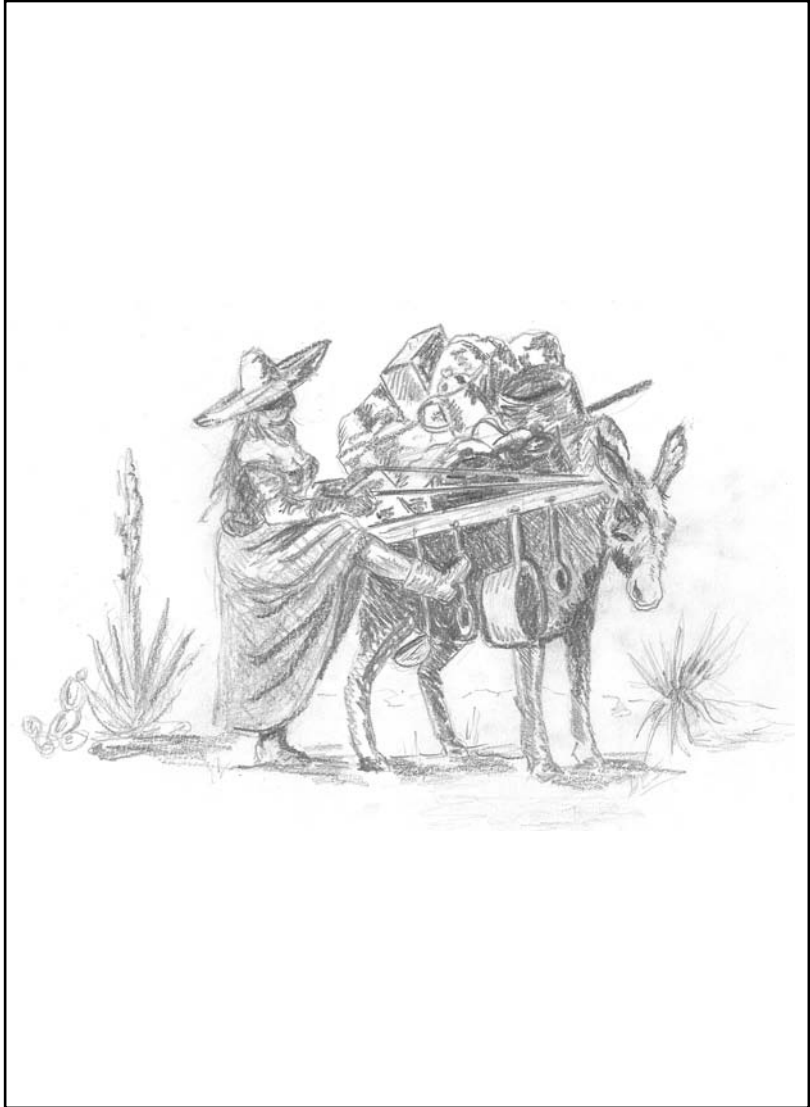
### **Josephine Earp (?) – Mrs. Wyatt Earp:**

The photograph of a comely young woman in a diaphanous negligee has long been identified as Josephine Earp; however, that is now questioned. Many historians believe the picture is that of photographer's model Evelyn Nesbit. The picture is called "Lacoma" because it was used on the cover of a composition entitled "Lacoma Valse Hesitante." (Lucky Bonner, "Is the Alleged Josie Earp Photo Really of Evelyn Nesbit?" *True West*, August 2005, p. 107).

### **"Big Nose Kate" and "Doc Holliday:**

Kate and Doc were 21 months apart in age; yet the two photographs commonly placed together show Doc in his early 30's and Kate about 20 years later. Consequently, I have chosen to draw from photos of Kate at age 17 and Doc at 21, attempting to age each slightly by hair styles and Doc's moustache, so that they appear more like they must have looked when they met in Wichita. (Incidentally, Doc was not one of Kate's clients there).

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**Sarah Bowman's donkey**

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## The Great Western Sarah Bowman

(Sarah Knight was born in Tennessee or Missouri around 1812 or 1813. She later went by several last names (e.g., Borginnis, Bourjette, Bowman) — sometimes due to legal marriages.

“Great Western” was the largest steam ship  
That sailed the Atlantic Ocean,  
And Sarah was a sizable girl,  
Who served the troops with devotion.  
“Lordie! Look at the size of her!”  
A soldier saw Sarah in camp.  
“Purt nigh big as Great Western!” he mused,  
And that’s how the name was enstamped.

When General Zachary Taylor was sent  
To the Bay (Corpus Christy) that fall,  
She followed her sergeant husband to war,  
She towered high over them all.  
“The Western,” as Sarah preferred to be called,  
Was “athletic and graceful in form”  
“Majestic,” “Gigantic,” “Remarkable large,”  
Like sunshine right after a storm.

A shabby hamlet quickly sprang up,  
And as winter came blustering down,  
Shacks and makeshift saloons like magic appeared  
Filled with riffraff — a small tacky town.  
“No ladies and very few women,” ‘twas said,  
Only three drew laundresses’ pay  
From the U.S. Army, and one was she  
Who was called “The Great Western,” they say.

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Now Sarah's husband was shipped out by sea,  
And since him she could not follow,  
She mounted a donkey that pulled a small cart  
Laden with meager belongings and also:  
Washtubs and tin cups and camp cooking pots,  
Tin plates and buckets and basins.  
For Sarah was keeping the officer's mess  
for her "boys." She would no way disgrace them!

Her husband sailed off to oblivion,  
No more is heard of that fellow.  
Sarah rode on with the General's troops  
Through fields of blue bonnets and yellow.  
Taylor crossed the Rio Nueces, you know.  
The president knew that this would mean war,  
For Mexico claimed that the border'd been crossed  
Into their country's interior. <sup>1</sup>

We built Fort Texas. The fighting began.  
Sarah tended the wounded and dying,  
Bandaged the bleeding and carried the dead,  
While the shots and the shells defying.  
Taylor'd split up his troops and left Major Brown  
In charge of the fort. At sundown  
The Major was mortally wounded, and so  
*Fort Texas* was changed to *Fort Brown*.

She could "whip most anybody," twas said,  
And she proved she could handle a gun,  
By the time Taylor's reinforcements arrived,  
We'd the Mexicans well on the run;  
Yet, she moved like a "min'stering angel" they vowed,  
'Mongst the wounded and dying and down,  
Carried coffee by buckets to soldiers who fought,  
Did this good "heroine of Fort Brown."

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At Saltillo, her lover, Cap. Lincoln, was killed.

She mourned as she took up his musket,  
She swore at the foe, reloaded and fired,  
Kept firing and, sure 'nough, by dusk, it  
Was said that the Mexicans fled from the scene  
For fear of the Amazon warrior.  
She had slugged a U.S. deserter who said <sup>2</sup>  
Old Taylor would lose. He was sorrier

Than perhaps he'd have been if the thing had been true,  
But then he and the other deserters  
Fled back to the line and fought with a will —  
Sarah's nostrils were breathing murder.  
When George Lincoln's horse was auctioned off,  
Twas going for seventy dollars,  
"Two hundred fifty!" big Sarah cried.  
And it seemed that she stood even taller.

"None who bids seventy wants that fine horse!"  
Then bids, there were simply no others.  
The Western solemnly purchased the horse  
and sent it to George Lincoln's mother.

Some said that Sarah was six feet tall,  
others said, six one or six two  
One said she was "over seven feet tall,"  
"Erect and majestic," and few  
Were the soldiers who stood up as high;  
She made many a big man look small.  
Her hair was red and her posture proud,  
Few would stand up to Sarah at all.

Between battles Sarah would often start  
A "full-service" boarding hotel,  
With dining room and "etceteras",  
And one certain man would tell  
How Sarah herself, that "immense woman,"  
As soothing as rain after drouth,  
"Could stand flat-footed and drop those there  
Sweet sugar plums right in my mouth."

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The soldiers were welcomed and openly flocked  
To her hotels both sides of the river,  
There, somehow an unwritten truce was called,  
And rare was the soldier who'd give her  
Or one of her girls a difficult time;  
Twas well known — the knife she carried,  
Yet 'twas more from respect that they walked  
a fine line,  
They came, they caroused, and they tarried.

Guadalupe Hidalgo's Treaty was signed  
Which ended that Mexican War.  
Lieutenant Colonel John Washington said,  
"To California!" and Sarah, therefore,  
Posed right before Colonel Washington's tent  
On a horse with three wagons behind,  
Asking permission to go with the troops.  
What sort of excuse could he find?

All through the battles of Monterey,  
Buena Vista, and Rio Grande,  
Her love had flowed through her cooking and care  
Like water flows down the Big Sandy.  
"A woman," he said, "to follow the troops,  
Must be married to a dragoon,  
And be mustered in as a laundress!"  
And so, before the drawn-up platoon,

Sarah loudly shouted, "Who wants a bride  
With biggest leg in all Mexico —  
And fifteen thousand dollars besides?  
'Shout out, my fine beauties!" she cried, "Let's go!  
Now, just who is the lucky man here?"  
(The thought of taking the Western to wife —  
Just who could such strength commandeer?)

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Then Davis of Company E called out,  
    having given the matter due thought,  
“I have no objection to marrying you,  
    Be there preacher for tying the knot.”  
“The knot, you say?” the Great Western cried,  
    “Bring your blanket to my tent this evening,  
And I’ll learn you to tie more kinds of knots  
    Than you ever thought of achieving!”

But after the wedding, the Great Western spied  
    A man of proportions tremendous  
To match those of her own colossal size,  
    (Which everyone said was stupendous).  
For him she tossed husband Davis aside;  
    But that too, didn’t last very long,  
Another named Davis fell ‘neath her thrall:  
    Calling her “well proportioned” and “strong”.

At Socorro she took up with Juan Duran  
    And five orphaned children she cared for,  
“The prostitute with the heart of gold,”  
    (Was it she that the phrase was prepared for?)

Then Sergeant Albert Bowman she wed  
    And together they headed on west. <sup>3</sup>  
At Yuma Crossing arriving, they stayed;  
    Soon Sarah was keeping the mess

For the officers of the fort that was built,  
    To protect the settlers who ferried  
Across the Colorado River there.  
    At the Crossing the Bowmans tarried.  
They built a hotel at Fort Yuma  
    For Sarah was bound to deliver;  
Still another place she successfully ran  
    In Mexico over the river

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Where her army officers often repaired  
When they wanted a little excursion  
And there they consistently were assured  
Full many a merry diversion.  
Yes, her clients were the officers,  
For she, with her fine business head,  
Knew that they would surrender their fat pay checks  
Once they had been properly fed.

She and Albert took boarders in Tucson,  
Then they went with the first dragoons  
Who established a fort on Sonoita Creek, <sup>4</sup>  
so the Bowmans put a saloon  
In one of their “hotels” in Patagonia  
For all of those officer fellows  
Knew that the Western would always provide  
Them biscuits, a bar, and bordello.

The Bowmans went back to Yuma,  
And Albert was often off mining,  
For sixteen years they made it that way,  
Then Albert’s love started declining.  
But Sarah ignored his departure  
There was still a plethora of men,  
So when the troops moved, she was eager  
And willing to try it again.

With the Civil War forcing the closure  
Of western forts, troops were sent East.  
“The Western” asked to be mustered in,  
But the regulation had ceased  
That allowed for the placement of women  
To launder and cook for the troops  
On the army payroll, so that major loophole  
Demanded that Sarah recoup.

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But when Confederates moved into Tucson,  
Union troops passed again through the fort,  
And The Western had several good “hotels”  
At various spots for support.  
As laundress for American soldiers,  
She drew a good ration for life,  
The best known gal in the army  
Didn’t need, now, to be a man’s wife.

The Western was loved and respected  
Packed two six-shooters. Called “A good soul,”  
She was “a hell of a good-hearted woman,”  
Who called Yuma “a damned old hell hole  
Separated by a sheet of sandpaper  
from the rest of hell down below.”

Sarah died in eighteen and sixty-six,  
At the age of just fifty-three,  
With military escort and honors  
While the band of the 12th Infantry  
Played over her flag draped casket  
Which was laid in Fort Yuma graveyard.  
The only female ever so honored.  
So high was the army’s regard  
For the laundress, the hospital matron,  
The cook, the warrior, the whore  
Who was loved by every soldier  
Who fought in the Mexican War.

- 
1. James Knox Polk was president of the U.S. from 1845-1849. He hoped to enlarge the size of his country by taking a portion of Mexico as the spoils of war. He did so. Mexico claimed the Nueces River marked the border between Mexico and the United States, while the U.S. proclaimed the line to be the Rio Grande farther south and west.

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2. “She just drew off and hit him between the eyes and knocked him sprawling; says, ‘You damned son of a bitch, there ain’t Mexicans enough in Mexico to whip old Taylor. . . . You just spread that report and I’ll beat you to death.’”
3. Sarah was the first Anglo female to reside in El Paso, Texas, then known as Franklin. There she started her popular Central Hotel for the comfort and convenience of soldiers and travelers. She is described as “the first madam/prostitute of record to appear on the El Paso scene.” (Gordon Frost, *The Gentlemen’s Club*, p.15). She is also called “*The first citizen of Yuma.*” (Trimble, *Arizoniana: Stories From Old Arizona*, p. 80-82).
4. This was Fort Buchanan, established after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the Mexican War in 1848.

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