

by *Sandra Ostgaard*

Women certainly made very important contributions to America's Western frontier. There are some interesting stories about the introduction of women in the West — particularly as cattlemen and wives of ranchers. These women were not typical cowgirls.

The frontier woman worked hard in difficult settings and contributed in a big way to civilizing the West. For the most part, women married to ranchers were brought to the frontier after the male established himself. Conditions were rough in the decade after the Civil War, making it difficult for men to provide suitable living conditions for themselves, much less their wives.

Most aspiring ranchers thought the conditions just too harsh for women. The idea at the time was to establish oneself in the ranching industry and then to

return to one's hometown to find a bride — or if the individual had a wife, to make arrangement to take her out West. This was the beginning of adventure for many a frontier woman.

Susan McSween

Susan McSween (Dec. 30, 1845-Jan. 3, 1931) was a prominent cattlemen of the 19th century. Once called the "Cattle Queen of New Mexico," the widow of Alexander McSween, who was a leading factor in the Lincoln County War and was shot and killed by members of the Murphy-Dolan faction.



Susan married McSween Aug. 23, 1873, in Atchison, Kan., and settled in Eureka, Kan. In 1875 the couple moved to Lincoln, N.M., where McSween accepted a job with the company of Lawrence Murphy. Working alongside James Dolan, McSween soon lost his desire to work for the company and became friends with John Tunstall, a wealthy English rancher. Through Tunstall, the couple met John Chisum, and by 1877 the three men had established a rival business to the Murphy-Dolan businesses.

The Murphy-Dolan faction was backed by the infamous Santa Fe Ring. Problems soon developed, and when outlaw Jesse Evans and members of the Santa Fe Ring shot and killed Tunstall, the Lincoln County War began.

By that time, Tunstall and McSween had hired gunmen to counter those hired by Murphy-Dolan. While the latter hired outlaw gangs like the Seven Rivers Warriors, the John Kinney Gang

and the Jesse Evans Gang, Tunstall hired individuals, including Billy the Kid, Chavez y Chavez, Dick Brewer, Charlie Bowdre and Doc Scurlock. The two factions clashed over Tunstall's death, with numerous people being killed by both sides and culminating in the Battle of Lincoln, where Susan was present. Her husband was killed at the end of the battle, despite being unarmed and attempting to surrender.

Susan struggled in the aftermath of the Lincoln County War to make ends meet in the New Mexico Territory. She sought and received help from Tunstall's family in England. She served as the executor of Tunstall's and her husband's estates, managing to free herself of their accrued debts by liquidating the estate assets. In 1880 she married George Barber, a young law clerk and later attorney, who aided in her recovery. Barber's work as a surveyor for John Chisum resulted in Chisum gifting 40 head of cattle to Susan — worth about \$400 to start her into the cattle business. Later the couple divorced.

Susan took over 1,158 acres of land on the west side of the Mesalero Apache Indian Reservation in the years after the Lincoln County War. By 1890 she ran at least 5,000 head of cattle under the Three Rivers Cattle Co. brand in Three Rivers, N.M. In the mid-1890s her ranch holdings were some of the largest in the territory. She became extremely wealthy through cattle sales and mining a small silver vein on the property. She was also known for the fruit orchards she planted with trees she obtained from John Chisum. **HW**



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