

The Spokesman Review June 2008 Online Book Club Selection:

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If it's true that history is written by the victors, then men have been victorious at most things. Traditional history, the kind that many of us learned in the decades immediately following World War II, is largely a story of men – fighting wars, negotiating peace, exploring the unknown and recording their exploits for the generations that followed. But until relatively recently, what few historians seemed to have grasped, or cared about, is that women were part of the story, too. In many cases, they were the story.



"Gold Rush Women," a book co-written by Spokane author Claire Rudolf Murphy that is the June read of The Spokesman-Review Book Club, attempts to correct that historical record. In this young-adult work of nonfiction, Murphy and co-author Jane G. Haigh tell the story of 23 women who trekked up, over and through Klondike territory during the gold rush of the late 1890s.

One of those women, a Tagish native named Shaaw Tlaa, was one of the discoverers of the original gold lode. Married to a prospector named George Carmack, Shaaw Tlaa is known more through her married name, Kate Shaw. For five years, the two lived in and around the Fortymile and Stewart River areas of northwest Canada's Yukon Territory.

"With Kate's skill and knowledge of the wilderness, they were able to live off the land," Murphy wrote. "To support George's prospecting trips, Kate sewed mukluks and mittens to sell to other miners.

"Kate's niece, Kitty Smith, remarked, 'He's got a wife, he's all right! She does everything, that Indian woman, you know, hunts, just like nothing, sets snares for rabbits. That's what they eat!'"

Murphy, a Spokane native, has a personal interest in Alaska: A former Jesuit Volunteer, she lived there for 24 years. A history graduate of Santa Clara University, Murphy went on to earn a teaching credential and master's of fine arts in creative writing. She taught middle-school language arts and, following the birth of her children, quit teaching to begin writing. She's published a number of young-adult and children's books based on history and culture, including "I Am Sacajawea, I Am York: Our Journey West with Lewis and Clark" and "Free Radical."

The women Murphy and Haigh profile in "Gold Rush Women" represent a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences. Together they were largely responsible for what culture gradually developed in the various settlements. As Rudolf says on her Web site, "These women came from all over the world, so each brought her own culture.

Many were immigrants from Europe and didn't even speak English at first. It was mostly the women who saw to it that churches, schools, hospitals, and libraries were built."

They included other native women (Athabaskan Jennie Alexander), African-Americans (Lucille Hunter, who gave birth on the Dawson trail), business-minded types (sisters Belinda and Margaret Mulrooney, founders of Dome City Bank) and other hardy survivors such as Ethel Berry, who ended up panning her way to millionaire status.

"The women who joined the gold rushes in the Yukon and Alaska between the late 1880s and the early 1900s get scant attention in the history books," wrote Hazel Rochman for the literary-review

journal Booklist. "This collective biography draws on primary sources to tell their stories, with fascinating historical photographs and portraits on every page."

Humboldt State University professor Carolyn Lehman, writing in School Library Journal, added: "These stories of triumph, tragedy, hard work, and hard luck create a vibrant and multilayered picture of early Alaskan and of American society in the 1890s."

A vibrant and multilayered picture, maybe. A more complete picture, definitely.