

Finding Lives of Independence:
The Tattooed Lady and the Nineteenth-Century American Traveling Circus

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Tattoos and those who don them have been a source of fascination around the globe for centuries. Modern society has only just begun to embrace tattoo culture as a socially acceptable means of self-expression in the past five decades, yet for hundreds of years tattoos have captivated Westerners. Tattooed ladies were some of the first entrepreneurs of the entertainment industry to intentionally capitalize on this fascination and use it to their advantage.

The first tattooed ladies who debuted in travelling circuses in America in the late nineteenth century were remarkably successful pioneers of a unique line of work that would go on to explode in popularity in the West. The fact that these women surfaced and rose to fame around the same time as the first public outcry for women's rights creates an interesting juxtaposition between two completely separate worlds. While middle-class women were only just beginning to fight for equality, fair pay and voting rights, a few lower-class women from poor families were making up to ten times more than the average man in their line of work. On top of that, these women were allowed to travel the country or even the world, an unfathomable luxury for most women of the time.

When Nora Hildebrandt and Irene Woodward made their debuts as tattooed performers in the spring of 1882, the circus and tattoo industries changed forever.¹ Both of these women had grown up in lower-class, working families, the daughters of farmers or servants. They traveled to New York to be tattooed by an established artist, Martin Hildebrandt, who later became Nora's common-law husband.² These women were likely influenced to make this bold career move by Captain Constantus,

¹ Amelia Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady: A History* (Golden, Colorado: Speck Press, 2009), 35.

² Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 39–42.

the most famous tattooed man of the day. Constentus reportedly earned \$1000 a week as a performer, a sum far greater than the average middle-class man of the time. These women were young when they left their homes — Irene in her late teens, and Nora in her twenties.³ Soon after Nora and Irene’s appearances, increasing numbers of women began covering themselves head to toe with tattoos in order to join traveling shows. Eventually, tattooed ladies would become became a commonplace and integral attraction of the American circus.

As the first well-known tattooed female performers, Nora Hildebrandt and Irene Woodward broke away from strict gender roles of the late nineteenth-century Victorian era and became some of the first women to travel the world and live self-sufficient, independent lives. Tattooed women like Nora and Irene found a niche market that allowed them liberties that most women would not experience for decades. While Nora and Irene did receive some male assistance throughout their careers, they were far more independent and self sufficient than the average lady of the time in terms of income, travel, and self-determination.

These women are historically relevant to the study of gender equality, yet they have been overlooked in the related literature for a variety of reasons. Although extensive literature exists on the women’s rights movement and the first examples of female independence and equality, Nora and Irene’s stories have been excluded from this category of historical writing. This has likely occurred because there is no evidence to suggest that they took much interest in politics or the women’s rights movement, and because their low social status caused them to fall outside of the

³ Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (New York, NY: powerhouse Books), 12.

movement itself, which initially occurred almost exclusively amongst middle-class women.⁴ The Industrial Revolution and the rise of mass amusements created a place for women in the entertainment industry. This niche market allowed some female performers to experience some of the liberties that upper-class women would seek out in years to come far sooner than the women's rights movement would allow.

This paper examines the societal factors that made it possible for tattooed ladies to achieve success, self-sufficiency, and independence at a time when most women were expected only to be homemakers and mothers. To truly understand the social context that gave rise to the age of the tattooed lady, it is first necessary to shed light on the history of tattoos in the West.

The age of the tattooed lady corresponded, ironically, with the Victorian era. In the early 1800's, when Nora and Irene were making their first public appearances, privacy, motherhood and female domesticity were still very important to post-Civil War American culture. In the late nineteenth century, women were expected to remain at home, create a nurturing environment in which to raise their families, and to dress and act modestly while doing so. These were times when women did not typically work outside the home, and styles of dress were still quite conservative. Corsets and high necklines were the norm, and long sleeves and hemlines covered everything from wrists to ankle.⁵ The middle-class women of this period had adopted this style to imitate the chic Europeans and to distinguish themselves from the "democratic mob" by way of appearance and etiquette in order

⁴ Sara M Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 102.

⁵ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 42.

to advance their social status.⁶ Naturally, the premise of displaying one's body in the way that a tattooed lady might would have been unfathomable to proper middle-class women in this day and age.

The research for this project consisted of a thorough review of the scholarly literature pertaining to the topics of nineteenth-century traveling circus, tattoo culture and history, and women's rights and roles throughout the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. This paper explores the emergence, rise and fall of the tattooed lady from the mid- nineteenth to the early twentieth century. For this research, I examined a variety of primary sources, including newspapers, posters, flyers, journal articles and books from the relevant time period, as well as a variety of perspectives, examples and opinions pertaining to tattoo culture and tattooed performers.

In addition to primary sources, scholarly papers and books on the topic of women and tattooing, such as Margot Mifflin's *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* and Amelia Klem-Osterud's *The Tattooed Lady: A History* were of great assistance in providing specific information regarding tattooed circus performers including Irene Woodward and Nora Hildebrandt, as well as an overall timeline for the history of tattooing and its evolution in modern history.⁷ Photos of newspapers and circus posters and flyers from both of these books were also valuable primary sources that depicted tattooed women as they were viewed at the time of their rise to fame and popularity.

⁶ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830 – 1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Publications: 1982), 61-62.

⁷ Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 12 – 59; Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 15 – 42.

The specific research that exists relating to tattooed women in nineteenth-century America tends to favor the idea that these women are important role models—unsung champions of women’s rights. The authors of this literature maintain that women like Nora and Irene deserve recognition for achieving fame, success, and relative independence as working class women in the late 1800’s. As a result, these authors tend to portray Nora and Irene as misunderstood and overlooked heroes of early feminism.

However, biased arguments aside, Klem-Osterud and Mifflin have conducted an enormous amount of detailed research, especially into primary sources. This research has helped to shed light on what life was truly like for these women, and where they fit into society at the time. These sources are useful for their extensive historical information relating to the personal lives of Nora and Irene, as well as the life of the average tattooed circus performer in the nineteenth century. Other sources providing relevant information on topics such as women’s rights, the Industrial Revolution, and American traveling circuses were also examined in order to place this research within an appropriate cultural and historical background. The resulting paper focuses on the liberties that Nora Hildebrandt and Irene Woodward experienced due to their work, and also critically examines the impact these women had on the entertainment industry and on the struggle for gender equality through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While research on the women’s rights movement is plentiful, the history of the tattooed lady has remained overlooked in the historical study of women’s independence. These women were not seen as part of the women’s rights movement

because of their low social status, yet they experienced liberties that women would fight for in decades to come. This was partially a result of their low social status, which kept their lifestyles out of the critical public eye. While they may not have escaped negative stigma or a low social status, some tattooed female performers were able to overcome poverty and even out earn their male counterparts.

The first tattooed ladies to achieve fame and success, Nora Hildebrandt and Irene Woodward inspired hundreds more women to become tattooed and join travelling shows to earn a living and escape lives of poverty. This phenomenon in itself is substantial evidence to suggest that Nora and Irene were significant and influential and that their independence and success were sought after by other lower class women hoping to improve their lives and travel the world.

Body marking traditions of some form date back to the Paleolithic era, thousands of years before recorded history. After the Egyptians adopted the practice, it spread throughout the world over several millennia. The Japanese appropriated and meticulously perfected the art, and from Japan it spread across oceans to the Philippines, Borneo, and especially to the Polynesian people in the Pacific Islands where Captain Cook and his crew initially observed the practice.⁸

One of the first and relatively unknown examples of the display of tattoos for public amusement comes from English sailor William Dampier, who brought “the Painted Prince,” a young royal aboriginal man, back to Europe from his exploration of Australia in 1691. Much like Omai, a Tahitian man who would later be taken to Europe onboard Captain Cook’s ship, the prince, a member of the Tahitian royal

⁸ George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1958), 15.

family, was taken from his home and introduced to the royal family in England and displayed like a circus spectacle.⁹ While there was no apparent mistreatment of the prince, literature suggests the young prince traveled around Europe for the amusement and fascination of the royal and wealthy, and appeared to have little say in the matter of his journey or his eventual return to Tahiti. Amelia Klem-Osterud, author of *The Tattooed Lady: A History*, argues that this event in particular sparked a fascination with tattoos in the West that lasted over two centuries, resulting in the display and showcasing of hundreds of tattooed people in various traveling circuses, freak shows and exhibits until the early 1900's.¹⁰

When Europeans conquered various native peoples in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, tattooing became stigmatized and caricatured due to the perceived "savage" nature of those who practiced the art form.¹¹ However, in the century after Cook's return, attitudes about tattoos seemed to shift in European society. While tattooing remained a practice exclusive to men until the mid nineteenth century, it gained popularity and lost some of its novel appeal. In the early twentieth century, tattooing became an established profession in Europe and the Americas, gaining popularity after the American Civil war and when English King Edward VIII was tattooed in Jerusalem for the first time.¹²

This drastic shift marked the first public embrace of tattoo culture in Western civilization. It was not long after this that for the first time in Western culture in

⁹ Burchett, *Memoirs*, 22.

¹⁰ Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 15-17.

¹¹ Enid Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body" *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 319-44.

¹² Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 26-27.

nearly a thousand years, women were allowed to be included in the practice as well, even if only in secret. Margot Mifflin, author of *Bodies of Subversion: a Secret History of Women and Tattoo*, recalls that as tattoos became more popular and fascinating to Europeans and Americans in the mid nineteenth century, society ladies in Europe began ornamenting themselves with discrete feminine tattoos. Men obtained full-body tattoos and began performing in circuses.¹³ While tattooed men proved intriguing to circus goers, ultimately they could not compete with an even more tantalizing spectacle: the first performing tattooed women.

The strict Victorian values of the 1800's were still very much in fashion when Nora and Irene debuted in New York. Attitudes and styles of dress were conservative, and society was very much opposed to the way tattooed women displayed their bodies for public entertainment.¹⁴ This was a time when women were just barely beginning to break into the world of paid labor. The Civil War created a need for nurses, and increased education demands allowed women to break into teaching. Outside of these gendered occupations, however, women, especially in the middle class, were largely expected to remain at home with their children and the housework.¹⁵

The Industrial Revolution created thousands of working-class jobs and resulted in the rise of mass entertainments such as the cinema, fairs, theater arts and travelling circuses.¹⁶ Many lower-class women like Nora and Irene were able to

¹³ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion* 10–14.

¹⁴ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 42.

¹⁵ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18, 2 (1966): 151-174.

¹⁶ Cy Young, "The Rise of Mass Entertainment," (*Class Zone - McDougal Littell*, 2008), https://www.classzone.com/net_explorations/U6/U6_article1.cfm.

secure blue-collar jobs as maids, servants, or factory workers and to earn steady, if modest, incomes. In fact, some industries employed a female majority; Sara Evans reports that during the 19th century, women workers outnumbered men nearly 2 to 1 in the cotton textile industry.¹⁷

White middle-class women typically did not need to work, although a few brave women had some success achieving autonomy and self-sufficiency by working as teachers or nurses.¹⁸ Working-class women, however, typically found jobs in factories and textile mills, which paid such scant wages that a woman could not hope to support herself or a family on her own. For this reason, women made up a large proportion of the impoverished and homeless.¹⁹ This class-based reality distinguished the middle and lower classes and meant that women in the workforce typically held low-status jobs. Because middle-class women could afford not to work, workingwomen were viewed negatively for their low social status.

The insurgence of lower-class women into the workforce naturally diffused into all areas of the rapidly expanding industries, including entertainment. Women began working in factories, offices, schools, and hospitals, as well as in travelling shows, theater and other performing arts. Nora Hildebrandt and Irene Woodward were among the first women to enter a particular niche in the entertainment industry as tattooed female performers. Though the bourgeois middle class would have looked down upon this profession, it provided these women many new

¹⁷ Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 61.

¹⁸ Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 62.

¹⁹ Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 130-135.

opportunities that higher-class women would not be allowed for many years to come.

While a few middle-class women were just beginning to fight for gender equality in the 1800's, female performers like Nora and Irene were enjoying equal or higher pay to their male counterparts, as well as luxuries such as travel and financial and occupational autonomy, things that would have been impossible for most women during this time period, regardless of their socio-economic status.²⁰ At the point when Nora and Irene began achieving success and travelling the world performing in circus shows, most middle class women were still worrying about passing the self-imposed "fashion barrier." While middle-class women were for the most part still concerned with following the strict Victorian values of domesticity and advancing their social status with their appearances, Nora and Irene were some of the first women to enjoy the benefits of self-sufficiency.²¹

Tattooed women were fascinating to circus enthusiasts partly because of the sex-appeal they brought to their position, something that tattooed men just couldn't offer in the same way, but also because everything about their profession and their appearance was so different and so seemingly *wrong*.²² Decent women were not supposed to display themselves in provocative ways, and their tattoos were seen as barbaric and strange to most. The first performing tattooed ladies had to have a certain boldness in order to challenge the current gender norms and ideologies and

²⁰ Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 102-104.

²¹ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 62.

²² Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 36.

attain a life of independence during this time in history, before the concept of gender equality had generated any momentum.

However, the women's rights movement may not have allowed women like Nora and Irene to create successful careers for themselves. While these tattooed women may at first seem like some of the earliest forgotten members of this movement, their lower-class status set them apart from the middle-class women who actually took part in lobbying for gender equality and suffrage rights. In fact, their lower social status may have been what made it possible for them to become successful in the entertainment industry, as autonomous female performers.

The travelling circus grew out of the rise of public amusements in America. The American middle class grew significantly with the booming economy of the mid 19th century.²³ With rises in wages from increasing numbers of white-collar jobs and shorter work days after the industrial revolution, people were hungry for new forms of entertainment to pass the time not spent at work. During this time, working class men and women flocked to amusement parks, movies, dance halls, and travelling shows. This was one of the first times in history that recreation was heterosocial, and men and women could intermix in a relaxed social setting.²⁴

During this period, the public entertainment industry expanded exponentially as more and more middle class citizens sought out new forms of amusement and recreation. Circuses and freak shows became popular during this time and were incredibly successful. Because of the relatively inexpensive price of

²³ LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement For All* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 41

²⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements, Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-century New York*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 41, 57.

entry to circuses and freak shows, they were an accessible form of entertainment for the working class, and a novel leisure time activity that often only came to town for a few weeks or nights a year. P.T. Barnum revolutionized the dime museum and travelling circus industry, and advertised his shows and exhibits in “penny press” newspapers that circulated towns daily.²⁵ Ads created a false, exaggerated image of the people on display inside the circus tent. These penny press papers were not the only form of advertising for freak shows and circus exhibits; ads displaying distorted images of the actual exhibits were commonly presented in newspapers, posters and handbills distributed when the show came to town. The stories told by tattooed women during their shows were an expansion of the information provided by these ads. In some cases freak shows would have “inside lecturers” who told the “true” biographies of the human spectacle on display. In the case of the tattooed lady, she most often spoke for herself, relaying her life story, which corresponded directly with the false image displayed in advertisements that was created for her by her promoter.²⁶ These images played to the societal stereotypes about tattoos and those who wore them. They lead spectators to understand tattooed performers as victims of capture and forcible tattooing as torture, instead of seeing them as free, independent individuals.

Tattooed women were a spectacle that both the middle and working classes found fascinating. In *Freakery*, author Robert Bogdan argues that freak shows capitalized on disability and human suffering, and that audiences were fascinated by

²⁵ Ashby, *With Amusement for All*, 63, 76.

²⁶ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery, Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. (New York: New York University Press, 1996) Ch. 2, 33 - 34.

mental and physical abnormalities because they were so rarely seen publicly in this period of history. Disabled people were largely kept away from the public eye and treated by medical professionals in private, secluded facilities. Due to their scarcity, awareness and compassion for the disabled was quite low; they were seen as horrifying spectacles instead of human beings. Bogdan goes on to discuss how this exploitation of the disabled through freak shows focused on the inferiority of the “human oddities” exhibited in freak shows.²⁷

However, tattooed performers were not disabled and were thus able to purposefully capitalize on this social fascination with the abnormal that was shared by both the middle and lower classes. While they had experienced some suffering in receiving full body tattoos, they fabricated the stories they told of their capture, torture, and involuntary tattooing that so enthralled audiences. They were not dehumanized and degraded by the plight of having a physical disability, in fact, tattooed ladies were quite aware that by getting tattooed, they were going to be seen as strange and abnormal, and they capitalized on just that. Tattooed performers were what were known as “made freaks,” individuals who superficially created the nature of their abnormality through surgery, physical manipulation, or in this case, tattooing.²⁸ They were intentionally socially deviant and they entertained notions of suffering for audiences, but in reality were quite in control of their own lives and images. It was due to this use of free choice that tattooed women were able to exploit the public’s fascination with physical abnormality and be so surprising, captivating, and successful.

²⁷ Bogdan, *Freakery*, p. 34–35.

²⁸ Bogdan, *Freakery*, 24.

Irene Woodward was only nineteen years old when she left her home somewhere in the west (reports vary) to be tattooed and join the company of a travelling show. Inspired by Captain Constantus, a world-famous tattooed man, Irene went to New York where Martin Hildebrandt tattooed her entire body from neck to ankles. She made her debut as La Belle Irene in New York at the Sinclair House hotel and at George B. Bunnell's dime museum in March 1882. She quickly moved on to another dime museum in New York, and within a year she had secured a spot on the Great Forepaugh Show and an agent, George Sterling, whom she would later marry and have a son with. Irene took a three-year hiatus from work where she dropped from the public eye from 1884 to 1887. Reports vary on the reason behind this break, but there is evidence to suggest she had a child during this time.²⁹ By 1888 she was back to work, sitting for photos and working at the Forepaugh Show as their only tattooed lady. When the Forepaugh show closed the following year, Irene and her husband began their first international tour of Europe. They began in London with P. T. Barnum's show where Irene performed as the Barnumic Tattooed Lady. They moved on in 1890 to Paris and later Germany, where they lived for several years before returning to the US, and then back to Paris and Russia.³⁰ In total, Irene spent the greater part of fifteen years travelling abroad before she returned home to Philadelphia, where she died in 1915 at 53. The cause of her early death remains unknown. In her thirty-year career, La Belle Irene achieved international recognition and travelled the world. These privileges alone were far more than most American middle class women could have ever hoped for

²⁹ Klem-Osterud, 39.

³⁰ Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 40-41.

at this point in history.

Nora Hildebrandt was born in England around 1857 and came to the US as a servant early in life. She met her future husband, Martin Hildebrandt in her early twenties, and allowed him to tattoo her entire body in 1882. Details on Nora's debut are vague, but news of her debut performance first appeared in the entertainment newspaper the *New York Clipper*. She made her debut in New York in 1884 at twenty-nine years old, just weeks after Irene performed at Bunnell's dime museum. Soon after, she traveled to Mexico, Paris and Berlin. During performances, Nora told audiences a tale of her capture by Indians out West, who then forced her father, a tattoo artist, to tattoo her. Despite some negative press regarding her less delicate appearance and older age, Nora toured successfully and captivated thousands of audiences with her illustrated skin and intriguing stories of her capture and forced tattooing. By 1885, her husband Martin had been arrested and they split soon after. Nora later remarried a tattooed man named Jacob Gunther and together they signed on to work with Barnum & Bailey in 1890. Nora and Jacob travelled throughout the United States with Barnum & Bailey extensively until Nora died suddenly and of unknown causes at the young age of thirty-six.³¹ While her career was not as long as Irene's, Nora Hildebrandt overcame poverty and a life as a domestic servant, travelled internationally, and achieved fame and independence in a short seven years.

The fact that these women were able to travel the world at this point in history is significant because this was a time when few women had the means to venture

³¹ Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 42-43.

overseas. Missionaries and sailors were the exceptions, and there were a few female travellers amongst them, but their experiences abroad were much different than a tattooed lady's would have been. Tattooed women were "treated as respectable ladies," reports Klem-Osterud, who maintains that these women were treated with dignity by those they worked with, even if audiences found them to be utterly shocking.³²

When a tattooed lady performed, she did not simply sit for a gaping audience in silence. Quite often, she would tell her "true" life story. A tattooed lady's story began with the images and descriptions on the advertisements that circulated town before the show. These stories were carefully constructed to elicit particular responses from the audience, typically horror, pity, and fascination. Tattooed ladies would tell fables of kidnapping, Native American raids, and torture to explain their extensive tattoos. Irene and Nora both told similar tales to explain their tattoos to the audiences that paid to see them.

Irene told audiences that she lived alone out West with her father, a former sailor, who tattooed her as a young girl. In her story, she claimed that she was delighted by the tattoos and convinced him to continue tattooing her until most of her body was covered. Irene reported to her audiences that after her father supposedly died in a raid by Native Americans, they released Irene because the Native American Indians feared her tattoos. Irene claimed that she found a home in the circus soon after her escape.³³

Nora, on the other hand, claimed that she was born in Australia, but later

³² Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 45.

³³ Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 38-41.

traveled to the US to move west with her father who was a tattoo artist. Like Irene, Nora's story suggested that she and her father were victims of raids from the Native American tribes who forced her father to tattoo her. When he refused to continue, Nora reported, he was murdered. Nora told audiences that a cavalryman rescued her after her father's death. Circus owner Adam Forepaugh saved her, gave her a new start, and then took her in.³⁴

While these women had very intentionally been tattooed for their own profit, they knew that stories of capture and suspense were much more engrossing explanations for their appearances because they played upon the fears and tall tales of the 'wild west' and 'savages,' while also confirming the common portrayal of women as helpless victims. Not only that, but by making it seem as though they were tattooed against their will as they most often claimed, these women were able to appear to be somewhat less in control of their own destinies, and thereby seem more in line with the gender norms of the time. Women at this time were not supposed to create their own careers, let alone earn more than most men. By telling audiences tall tales of kidnapping and torturous tattooing, tattooed ladies were able to appear to be victims, and thus seem more domestic, docile and feminine. The tattooed lady's capture story was an ingenious way to trick audiences and to seem less socially deviant, when in reality these women were enjoying freedoms far ahead of the vast majority of women of their time.

During the Victorian era, few women were allowed the luxury of traveling on their own terms. While some women did enjoy the liberty of travelling for personal

³⁴ Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 41-43.

pleasure or for work, they had to be especially careful to maintain their domestic, proper appearance and tended to be viewed as “slightly mad,” reports Birgitta Maria Ingemanson.”³⁵ Tattooed ladies had far more freedom than travelling middle-class women when they travelled. While many tended to dress in the traditional Victorian style and to behave in a proper, demure, feminine manner, they were not held to the same expectations as other middle-class women who were able to travel the world at this time. Ingemanson explains that assuming the “costume” of a proper lady provided female travellers with both freedom and shelter, paradoxically, by masking their mobility and unique liberties with a veil of domesticity.³⁶ In other words, these travelling women operated under the illusion that they got by only with male help, and were innocent and obedient, but in reality they were far more in control of their own fates than they let on. This was much the same for tattooed women at this time, however their travel was typically arranged for them, and they did not have to go to quite the lengths that other women hoping to travel at this point in history might have. Tattooed women often had the freedom to stay abroad as long as their wages would allow, provided they could find work. Nora and Irene, for example, both spent many years abroad before returning to the United States. However, it tended to be the case that tattooed women would travel with their male managers, would take a husband while travelling or would bring their loved one abroad with them. These women would also often take a hiatus from their work to have a family. This suggests that there were limits to female mobility, and that men tended to be around

³⁵ Bonnie Frederick, Susan H. McLeod, eds. *Women and the Journey: The Female Travel Experience*. (Washington State University Press, Pullman, WA, 1993). 5-6.

³⁶ McCleod, Frederick, eds. *Women and the Journey*, 6.

to help these women travel abroad. This creates an interesting and complex situation, where female travellers felt the need to appear more domestic in order to align themselves with the norms and values of that day, yet they also needed or wanted men with them on their journeys to help make their trips easier.

Interestingly enough, many middle-class travelling women found it difficult to come back to “real life” at home once they returned from their travels. Their façade allowed them freedom when they were on the road, but many found it difficult to return to their homes when their journeys were finished.³⁷ Tattooed women, on the other hand, did not have to operate under quite the same veil of domesticity because they were not constrained by the strict societal mandates of the higher class. These women were instead able to enjoy some bourgeois luxuries while avoiding the social consequences of leaving home and travelling independently that a middle class lady might face upon her return. Instead of being viewed as an outcast, as a middle-class lady might be upon her homecoming, tattooed women did not have to deal with these kinds of reactions because their friends and family were typically involved in the circus and carnival industry as well. Travelling circus culture created an atmosphere where women were granted opportunities and freedoms that were rare for the upper class. Additionally, these active, travelling women were not met with the same social resistance that might have been present in a middle-class community because they were seen as travelling spectacles much like Omai, the Pacific Islander Captain Cook brought back to Europe, and not as independent, working women who chose their own lifestyles and occupations.

³⁷ McLeod, Frederick, eds., *Women and the Journey*, 12.

Nora and Irene both travelled the US extensively throughout their careers. In addition to US tours, Nora spent several months in Mexico, and lived in France and Germany for extended periods. Irene lived in Paris, France for several years and travelled to Germany and Russia multiple times in her thirty-year career.³⁸ While touring with a circus, the average tattooed lady would typically earn about \$100 to \$200 per week, similar to the top performers, who reportedly earned anywhere from \$125 to \$250 per week, depending on the show, their skills, and the popularity of their act.³⁹ In comparison, the average working man, or working family at the turn of the century made about \$5 to \$12 per week, according to Alice Kessler-Harris, author of *Out to Work*.⁴⁰ While these women's travels did depend somewhat on their agents and the particular shows they were working for, they far out-earned most male performers and workingmen of their time and were allowed many liberties that would have been uncommon for other female travellers. For example, these women were permitted to live abroad for extended periods, and it was common that tattooed ladies would choose their shows and work contracts in order to best suit their lifestyles.

Nora and Irene both died of unknown causes, and at relatively young ages. Nora's career was shorter than Irene's due to her sudden, early death around 1891 at the age of 36. Irene passed away at 53 years of age after retiring from her lifelong career.⁴¹ These women are well known and remembered as the world's first

³⁸ Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 41-43.

³⁹ Stephen Otterman, "On Display; Tattooed Entertainers in America and Germany" In: *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Ed. Jane Caplan. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) p. 203.

⁴⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 12.

⁴¹ Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 38-43.

tattooed ladies, and during their brief careers as performers they inspired hundreds of others to follow in their footsteps. The forgotten profession that Nora and Irene pioneered allowed a few bold working-class women the opportunity to rise above their lives of poverty, to travel and to earn more money than most men of the time.

By popularizing the tattooed lady in American circus culture, Nora and Irene opened up a new career option for working class women who were willing to don tattoos and perform in traveling circuses. After Nora and Irene's debuts, tattooed women became a commonplace attraction for most traveling shows. Nora and Irene made it possible for future performers like Anna Gibbons, or "Artoria" to have successful lifelong careers. Artoria had a career of over fifty years as a performing tattooed lady, and she joined the circus and became tattooed because she was inspired by Nora and Irene's success stories.⁴² Because of their groundbreaking choice, many more women like Artoria were influenced to become tattooed ladies and live far more interesting lives than most working class women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century America.

The rise of mass entertainment allowed for these "painted ladies" to become incredibly successful and to become some of the first women to enjoy self-sufficiency, equal pay, and increased social freedom in nineteenth-century America when women's rights were just barely becoming a pressing issue. In addition to creating a new career for working-class women, Nora and Irene were some of the first free-willed female figures of this time period. Clearly, these women had greater opportunities and freedoms granted to them than most. Furthermore, they

⁴² Klem-Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 56-58.

demonstrated their own free choice and liberty in ways that make them historically important, yet overlooked, examples of some of the first independent career-women in America.

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