

# **‘There is no respectable woman . . . that sells books!’**

## The Memoirs of Nineteenth-Century Women Book Canvassers

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines three memoirs by women canvassers: Annie Nelles, or, The Life of a Book Agent by Annie Nelles Dumond (1868), Six Years Experience as a Book Agent by Mrs. J. W. Likins (1874), and Facts by Harriet Wasson Styer (1881). These works record the physical, intellectual, and emotional labor of canvassing, offering a window into the otherwise little-documented experiences of women’s experiences working in a field that both recruited and presented numerous challenges for them.*

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IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA, MANY OF THE COUNTRY’S inhabitants lived in areas where there were few opportunities to acquire books. Throughout the latter half of the 1800s, the book canvasser — a traveling salesperson who sold books on behalf of subscription publishers — became a familiar figure. Proponents of subscription publishing saw canvassers as doing the important work of bringing literacy to rural America. Popular media portrayals of canvassers, however, often were disparaging, depicting a calculating con-artist or naïve bumpkin hawking publications of dubious quality. While the majority of book canvassers were men, the late nineteenth century saw an increasing number of women entering the workforce, and some took up canvassing. If the ideal woman during this period was imagined to be quiet, retiring, and best-suited for the domestic sphere, what did it mean to be a female book canvasser, an occupation that required assertiveness, business savvy, and fortitude? Memoirs by women book canvassers can suggest at least a partial answer to this question. Their nuanced portrayals highlight the skills, nerve, and intense labor required of women in this profession while also foregrounding the additional effort needed to navigate the tension between canvassing and gender roles. This

essay examines three canvassing memoirs by women: *Annie Nelles, or, The Life of a Book Agent* by Annie Nelles Dumond (1868), *Six Years Experience as a Book Agent in California* by Mrs. J. W. Likins (1874), and *Facts* by Harriet Wasson Styer (1881).<sup>1</sup> By recording their professional successes, customer interactions, and feelings about canvassing, these writers offer a window into the otherwise little-documented experiences of women who worked in a largely forgotten but integral capacity within the nineteenth-century book trade.

## Subscription Publishing, Book Canvassing, and Women Canvassers

The origins of subscription publishing — a strategy used to mitigate some of the monetary risk of publishing by securing support upfront — can be traced back to seventeenth-century Britain, with patrons financing the production of expensive books for an elite audience (CASPER 2007, 220; FAHS 1998, 112). In the mid-nineteenth-century US, subscription publishing took the form of producing books of mass appeal for a broad audience (HACKENBERG 1984, 137–38). From the 1860s into the early twentieth century, these publishers enjoyed a thriving business making books that traveling salespeople (also called canvassers, agents, peddlers, or colporteurs) sold and distributed directly to customers (STERN 1987, 77). These individuals moved around a region visiting homes, businesses, and organizations with their prospectus (an incomplete sample of the book) to take orders and then return at a later date to deliver the purchases and collect payment (COOK 2002, 223).

The phenomenon of subscription publishing was enabled by a combination of factors, including the country's growing population, increasing literacy rates, and improving transportation (LINDELL 2004, 215; TRYON 1947, 220). Technological innovations meant that books could be produced faster, more cheaply, and in greater numbers (HACKENBERG 1987, 47–8). Bibles and manuals on farming, health, and domestic life were always in demand, but fiction, histories, biographies, and current events that appealed to readers' desire for self-improvement and entertainment also sold well (CASPER 2007, 220; COMPTON 1939, 33). Though sometimes of inferior quality, the books were intended to be tempting physical objects and status symbols: colorful, lavishly decorated, and making the most of the era's innovations

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1. Styer's *Facts* was first published anonymously ("by a woman").

in binding, design, and illustration (COOK 2002, 245; PFITZER 2007, 56). Nancy Cook notes that even though subscription books “were often more expensive than other books [. . .] many sold well, into the hundreds of thousands of copies” (2002, 245).

Although subscription publishing is little known today, its reach and impact were substantial (COMPTON 1939, 34). Michael Hackenberg contends that canvassing “truly transformed book dissemination in the nineteenth century. [. . .] Between 1861 and 1868, Hartford subscription firms are said to have made \$5 million, with 16,000 agents having sold 1,426,000 books” (1987, 66). Madeleine B. Stern echoes this sentiment: “If [the] methods were flawed and seldom fully effective, nonetheless they played an important role in America’s transition to mass production, urbanization and, especially, literacy” (1987, 93). Major works of the era, such as Mark Twain’s books and Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs, first made their way into the hands of readers via canvassers (CASPER 2007, 221).<sup>2</sup>

The success of subscription publishing was fueled by book canvassers and belied the difficulty of their work. Physically and emotionally demanding, canvassing required carrying heavy books for long hours in all kinds of terrain and weather. Furthermore, successful canvassing necessitated the social skills and hardiness to interact with a wide variety of individuals, some of whom inevitably would be unreceptive if not hostile. Book canvassers had to cover the cost of their kits (which could include a prospectus, order forms, and instructions on selling), as well as advance payment to publishers, transportation, food, and lodging (ARBOUR 1999, 9). Although some made money, it was a venture fraught with pitfalls and uncertainty, and many canvassing careers were short-lived (HACKENBERG 1987, 52). Women canvassers faced additional challenges, from enduring strangers’ gendered criticism to the difficulties and potential dangers inherent in traveling alone. In the employment handbook *What Can a Woman Do?* (1887), Mrs. M. L. (Martha Louise) Rayne outlines the specific attributes needed by the effective female canvasser: “much depends on personal magnetism and a quiet, lady-like persistence in representing the merits of the book [. . .] the true lady will compel every man into whose office or store she enters, to treat her as he would wish his own mother or sister to be treated” (145). The contradiction between the traits necessary for book canvassing — assertiveness, tenacity, self-confidence — and those of a “proper” lady

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2. For more on Mark Twain and subscription publishing, see: DICKINSON 1947, ARBOUR 1999, COOK 1996, and RAILTON 2012.

— reserve, docility, quiet — is strikingly apparent, illuminating the extra effort required of female canvassers to navigate this gap.

Given these factors, book canvassing may seem an unlikely job for women. Yet "lady canvassers" were the result of a broader cultural shift during the latter half of the nineteenth century that saw an increasing number of women entering the workforce (WALKUP 1992, xxii). According to the 1870 US Census — the first to record the number of female employees in the country — women comprised 15% of all workers. The percentage continued to rise in the following decades, to 20% in 1900 and 24% by 1910 (EDWARDS 1943, 92). This trend is reflected in late nineteenth-century employment guides aimed at women such as Rayne's *What Can a Woman Do?* and George J. Manson's *Work for Women* (1883), both of which include chapters on book canvassing. Writing on the history of the American salesperson, Walter A. Friedman observes that "there were 53,500 hucksters and peddlers in 1880 according to the census: of these, 51,000 were male and 2,500, female (and many of these women were book agents)" (2004, 34). The rise of female book canvassers also was likely the result of some subscription publishers recruiting women. According to Keith Arbour, "publishers deliberately recruited women, farmers' sons, teachers, and ministers", individuals who may have seemed more sympathetic to customers (1999, 8–9).<sup>3</sup> In her article on women's health and hygiene subscription books, Alicia Puglionesi finds that some publishers of these works hired women canvassers, believing they would be best suited to sell such titles to women readers (PUGLIONESI 2015, 486).<sup>4</sup>

Book canvassing attracted women because, while risky and challenging, it also offered unique benefits. Publishers stressed the opportunity for travel, adventure, and large profits (LINDELL 2004, 219). Although the latter was rare and the commission rates canvassers received varied, Arbour states that "the ratio of commissions to hours spent canvassing was not so high that agents could realize decent returns on less than factory schedules" (xii–xiii). Leon T. Dickinson contends that "on a \$3.50 book the agent would make a dollar, and might make \$100 a month" (1999, 114). Moreover, canvassing was a way to earn more than would be possible

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3. For more on the canvasser/customer relationship, see ZBORAY AND SACARINO ZBORAY 2005.

4. More work on how publishers targeted specific kinds of canvassers to sell to particular demographics remains to be done. In his biography of William Wells Brown, Ezra Greenspan found that publisher and bookseller Lee & Shepard recruited African American canvassers to sell Brown's book to African American readers; see GREENSPAN 2014.

through the other options available to women — such as teaching, sewing, factory or domestic work — while also setting one’s own hours and terms. In her memoir, Harriet Wasson Styer emphasizes the importance of autonomy and good wages: “I knew I could find no other employment which would afford me as much independence and be as remunerative” (1881, 303). Canvassing also appealed to women who, due to unforeseen or unconventional circumstances, suddenly found themselves in need of work. Mrs. J. W. Likins describes it as a “career of some who have had luxuries, now fallen on hard times, but don’t want charity” (1874, 167–68).

Yet for female canvassers, one of the costs of book canvassing was participating in a line of work some saw as suspect, demeaning, and inappropriate for women. The 1890 edition of *How 'Tis Done: A Thorough Ventilation of the Numerous Schemes Conducted by Wandering Canvassers* includes a chapter devoted to exposing the tactics of book canvassers, and within this chapter, a section about female canvassers. The author tells his male readers to beware of the woman canvasser who is likely to seduce them into buying expensive, unwanted books: “The masculine victim will be wheedled into buying anything, from an almanac to a family Bible in fifty-two parts, if the girl be pretty and have a winning smile” (HARRINGTON 1879, 130). The memoirs show that these women are well aware of such stereotypes. They grapple with how to feel about and portray their profession, alternately attempting to legitimize canvassing by stressing its value and their own hard work, and expressing misgivings about it. Dumond proclaims that although initially she had been worried it was discreditable work, “I have since learned to believe [. . .] no occupation which tends so directly, and so powerfully to the dissemination of light and knowledge among the masses, as does the book agency, can be called useless, degrading, or disreputable” (1868, 253). Less convinced, Likins confesses that she “knew it was an honorable and legitimate business, still it *seemed* to me very much like begging” (1874, 61). Their accounts ostensibly serve as platforms for elevating book canvassing and canvassers, but also reveal the women’s ambivalence about their work.

Despite subscription publishing’s significant role in nineteenth-century American print culture, little scholarship was produced on the topic until the 1980s. Experts such as Arbour insist that much research remains to be done and on canvassers in particular (1999, 6–7). One impediment, however, has been the limited surviving information on these individuals and their work; Stern calls the book canvasser an “an undocumented intermediary” (1987, 76; TRYON 1947, 210). Given the lack of existing documentation, memoirs can offer a window into canvassers’ lives. Several scholars

writing on subscription publishing have noted book canvassing memoirs, and a few have highlighted ones by women (ARBOUR 1999, 10; CASPER 2007, 221; GILREATH 1985, 555; LINDELL 2004, 220). There has not been, however, serious work done on the memoirs themselves. Canvassing memoirs can provide a wealth of information, including details about canvassers' relationships with customers and publishers, transportation and travel routes, and titles sold. Memoirs also reveal the intellectual, emotional, and psychological aspects of this work, facets that cannot be gleaned from order forms or other ephemera. More specifically, women's canvassing memoirs help us better understand their experiences navigating the complicated terrain of working within an emerging field in the book trade that actively recruited women but also presented numerous challenges for them.

### **Memoirs by Women Book Canvassers** *Annie Nelles, or, The Life of a Book Agent (1868)*

*Annie Nelles, or, The Life of a Book Agent*, was written and self-published by Annie Nelles Dumond in 1868. Dumond's memoir is notable for its reflections on women's status in mid-nineteenth-century America and her entrepreneurial attitude about book canvassing. Dumond does not begin bookselling until midway through her account, and because she positions her early life as essential to the reader's understanding of her later decisions and career, it is important to provide some background. Born in 1837, Dumond spends her first years growing up in luxury on a plantation in Atlanta, Georgia. Her father's death and mother's subsequent marriage to a man who proves to be a neglectful stepfather compel her to marry at a young age only to discover later that her husband already had a wife and children. After leaving him, she remarries but is abandoned by her second husband. She makes multiple unsuccessful attempts to earn a living, first as a painting instructor, then as a domestic. After relocating to Chicago, Dumond decides to respond to a newspaper advertisement for book canvassers and is assigned territories in northern Illinois and Indiana.

Historian James L. Murphy has written on the difficulty of confirming aspects of Dumond's personal life, and it is probable that she sensationalized her story to make it more enticing to readers.<sup>5</sup> Even so, Dumond's autho-

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5. Murphy also notes that individuals and relationships change in subsequent editions of Dumond's memoir. For example, in the fourth edition, "virtually all details relating to [her second husband] have disappeared" (2010, 180–81). This

rial intentions are worth considering. For one, her narrative of hardship serves as a justification for entering the dubious field of book canvassing, as she contends that her lack of education and training make it difficult to find and keep a more conventional job. Canvassing also allows her to support herself, saving her from poverty in a way that few other jobs could. Before becoming a book canvasser, Dumond is offered a sewing position. She declines, asking the manager, “How do you expect me to earn a living at those prices?” (1868, 179). Canvassing, in contrast, “afford[ed] me a comfortable living” (1868, 303). Furthermore, while the story of Dumond’s pre-canvassing life is extraordinary, her primary concerns — dependence on unreliable men, economic insecurity, and status and respectability — speak to issues fundamental to middle-class women. Recalling her decision to marry her first husband, she emphasizes the stakes inherent in the dynamic: “thus it was settled that I was to become his wife — to give up my freedom, my individuality, my all, into his keeping” (1868, 68). After leaving him she has difficulty starting a new life, her reputation tainted by his wrongdoings. Reflecting on this later, she says, “let any one, and especially a woman, commit a single error, and attempt afterward to repent of that error, and retrieve their standing and position — will society aid them in the slightest degree?” (1868, 219–20). While canvassing she wears a mourning bonnet, recasting herself from fallen woman to sympathetic widow, transforming the stigmatizing loss she had endured into one more socially acceptable: “It was not altogether right, but no one was injured thereby, and it seemed to me to be almost necessary to my self-preservation that my past should not be known” (1868, 289). While aspects of Dumond’s account may be fictionalized, her narrative highlights the limited options available to women and provides a compelling case for why a woman may have pursued the questionable work of book canvassing.

Popular depictions of canvassers often portrayed them as calculating in their manipulation of customers, yet simultaneously oblivious about books and bookselling. The protagonist of Elizabeth Lindley’s parody *Diary of Book Agent* (1912) is so uninformed that she does not realize Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain are the same person. A counterpoint to this example is Dumond’s memoir, which presents a self-possessed woman canvasser who develops business acumen. As she becomes familiar with the work, Dumond is increasingly deliberate about her choices. After gaining some

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article focuses on the first edition, which was the most readily available at the outset of this project. More recently, the second edition has been made available online.

understanding of canvassing, she decides to focus on selling one book at a time because, "My experience had taught me that the agent who attempted to canvas, at the same time, for five or six different works, was not likely to do well with any of them. The best way, in my judgment, is to select some good work, and give all one's efforts to that, to the utter exclusion of everything else" (1868, 334). Similarly, as she develops an appreciation of her market, she becomes strategic about the specific titles she sells. When she must travel south for personal reasons, her employer encourages her to take Edward A. Pollard's *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (1866). She rejects his suggestion and instead chooses Emanuel Rebold's *The General History of Freemasonry in Europe* (1866). Her decision is based on her knowledge of the subject (her father, brother, and stepfather were freemasons) as well as her certainty that this book will sell better in that area of the country (which she says it does). Dumond discusses her struggles and failures, but also records successes that are the result of her hard work, perceptiveness, and entrepreneurial approach. In their work on nineteenth-century women's life writing, feminist scholars Carolyn Heilbrun and Jill Ker Conway have observed that women typically wrote about personal relationships and domestic life, but seldom on professional experiences or accomplishments (1988, 24; 1998, 15). Dumond's description of her canvassing work, then, shows an ambition and intent that women rarely recorded for a public audience.

### ***Six Years Experience as a Book Agent in California (1874)***

*Six Years Experience as a Book Agent in California* by Mrs. J. W. (Amy) Likins was published by the Women's Union Book and Job Printing Office in 1874 (LEEK 2018).<sup>6,7</sup> Likins's memoir provides insight into the labor of book canvassing and the sexism she experiences in the course of her work. The account begins with her family selling their Ohio home after a devastating financial loss. Attuned to the popularity of travel narratives, Likins spends the first few chapters of her memoir documenting their journey to

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6. In her 2018 blog about California history, author and retired librarian Nancy Leek identifies Mrs. J. W. Likins's first name as "Amy": "if the 1870 census is to be trusted, she was Amy Likins, married to James, with a daughter Lucy, and in 1868, when she began her book-selling career, she was 37 years old" (<https://goldfieldsbooks.com/2018/07/26/a-lady-book-agent/>).

7. For more on the Women's Union Book and Job Printing Office and other women-run printing offices in California, see KEATS 1998 and WALKUP 1992.



California from New York via Nicaragua. After arriving in San Francisco, she resolves to find a way to earn money because her husband is in poor health and unable to work: “As I look around the room, I see nothing but want and poverty on every hand. Something must be done to get out of this place” (1874, 52). A “Canvassers Wanted” sign in the window of H. H. Bancroft’s store prompts her to inquire if they “employ lady agents” (1874, 52). Likins accepts a position selling engraved prints and books and is assigned a territory that includes part of the city but stretches as far north as Sacramento and as far south as Salinas.

As book canvassers became more common during the late nineteenth century, increasingly they were regarded as public nuisances (ARBOUR 1999, 10–11). An 1898 *Publisher’s Weekly* article observed that the book canvasser had become “the butt of ridicule and the subject of vigorous [. . .] profanity”.<sup>8</sup> (6). Likins’s memoir documents this trend from the perspective of a female book canvasser. While many customers are kind, she also writes of the hostile, and often gendered, treatment she receives from would-be patrons. Upon beginning her first day canvassing, she notes initial responses that cast her as a spectacle: “some looked at me curiously, others with pity, and *some few* with contempt” (1874, 53). The reader soon learns that such reactions are bound up in assumptions based on gender. Without knowing any details of Likins’s personal life, some customers condemn her for shirking her domestic duties. One man reprimands her, “you had better be at home, taking care of [your family], and not strolling about in this kind of manner” (1874, 90). Another concern is that she is not only visiting male-dominated spaces such as law offices, government buildings, and businesses, but doing so with the intent of making money. In one instance she describes a man who “seemed very angry to think a woman should be selling pictures among so many men” (1874, 55). Similarly, a customer who has encountered other female canvassers complains not that there are too many peddlers but that “there are getting to be too many of you women strolling around” (1874, 111). A few men antagonize Likins because they mistakenly assume that, as a female canvasser, she also is a suffragist, con-

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8. See *Publisher’s Weekly*, 1 January 1898, Number 1353. “An Anti-Book Agent Movement”. The work is available at [https://books.google.com/books?id=W2s-AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA6&lpg=PA6&dq=%22the+butt+of+ridicule+and+the+subject+of+vigorous%22&source=bl&ots=-0JQ7USJGC&sig=ACfU3U38ZrYtikHFOOnAjhqxYSOQw7f7g\\_Q&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwji2\\_aC77fwAhUXCs0KHcO1CdMQ6AEwAHoECAIQAw#v=onepage&q=%22the%20butt%20of%20ridicule%20and%20the%20subject%20of%20vigorous%22&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=W2s-AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA6&lpg=PA6&dq=%22the+butt+of+ridicule+and+the+subject+of+vigorous%22&source=bl&ots=-0JQ7USJGC&sig=ACfU3U38ZrYtikHFOOnAjhqxYSOQw7f7g_Q&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwji2_aC77fwAhUXCs0KHcO1CdMQ6AEwAHoECAIQAw#v=onepage&q=%22the%20butt%20of%20ridicule%20and%20the%20subject%20of%20vigorous%22&f=false)

flating two very different identities because both transgress gender norms.<sup>9</sup> A shop owner declares, "you d--- women think you will rule the country. There is a clique of you who go prowling around, having secret meetings, lecturing all over the country on women's rights" (1874, 56). Collectively, these responses to Likins suggest that the female book canvasser poses a problem beyond selling unwanted books. For these male critics, Likins and other female canvassers are evidence of women's increasing mobility, autonomy, and participation in the public sphere, and the negative reactions she experiences are rooted in anxiety and anger about this change.

*The Travelling Book-Agents Guide* (1865) somewhat paradoxically begins its detailed instructions with a claim implying the effortless nature of book-selling: "The whole country, from one end to the other, is a Book Market, full of Book Buyers; and the reading of one book, so far from satiating, only gives thirst and appetite for another and another. The sources of patronage are never run out. Books are *always* wanted" (HART 1865, 11). Publishers also stressed to potential canvassers the ease with which their particular titles would sell. Likins's memoir, however, shows the physical and intellectual labor book canvassing required. Her account provides an exceptional amount of detail about her work over a six-year period, and this sustained documentation serves to underscore her fortitude and effort. She notes over 20 works she sells throughout her career, including such canvassing staples as P. T. Barnum's *Life of Barnum* (1855), Laura C. Holloway's *The Ladies of the White House* (1870), and Henry M. Staley's *How I Found Livingstone* (1871). Her bestsellers, however, are by Mark Twain: *Innocents Abroad* (1869), *Roughing It* (1872), and *The Gilded Age* (1873). She also regularly reports how many books she sells in each location and notes with pride selling 105 copies of *Roughing It* in San Jose over a three-week period, the largest sale ever made there by a single canvasser.

While some information of this nature potentially could be found in publishers' records, Likins's narrative gives a fuller context. We understand that her victories are the result of long hours, tiring travel, and numerous disappointments; that the satisfaction of earning money is still tinged with

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9. It is worth noting that while all three of the memoirists highlight the problems of women's status and argue for their right to earn a living, none openly align themselves with suffrage or women's rights. It is difficult to discern whether this is indicative of their political and social views or a stance taken because of their already precarious position as female canvassers. Likins, for example, tells a customer that if a woman "having performed any duty as well as could possibly have been done by a man, she certainly ought to be enumerated the same", yet in the same conversation says she does not believe women should vote (1874, 90-1).

anxiety about her line of work; and that physical and emotional exhaustion are an inevitable part of canvassing, regardless of her success. After a particularly trying day, Likins admits that when she returned to her lodging, “I could not help weeping. I thought it was a great undertaking to be a book agent” (1874, 94). We also learn about the energy and skill needed for customer interactions, evidence that “sales depended upon the agent’s effective interpersonal communication” (ZBORAY and SACARINO ZBORAY 2005, 126). Describing a sale to a reluctant patron, she boasts, “after some lengthy discussion, for and against, I actually was successful in talking him into buying a book. When he had bought, and paid for it, he complimented me by saying that there was not another woman in the State could have persuaded him to buy” (1874, 91). Although Likins does not provide specifics about her pay, we do know that she not only earns enough to be the provider for her family, supporting herself, daughter, and husband for at least some period of time, but also to fund her husband’s brief partnership in a shoe factory. About its failure, she says, “as to whose fault it was, I am not able to say; but I felt the loss of that few hundred dollars more keenly than I did years ago, when many thousands were lost, for I had worked very hard for the few hundreds” (1874, 102).

### ***Facts* (Harriet Wasson Styer) (1881)**

*Facts by a Woman* was written anonymously by Harriet Wasson Styer and published by Pacific Press Publishing House in 1881.<sup>10</sup> Styer’s memoir is particularly valuable for its exploration of respectability and travel. She begins her narrative in Oakland, California, where she is tired of being a “miserable dependent” and struggling to figure out how to earn a living (1881, 17). A newspaper ad calling for agents to sell *Tom Sawyer* leads her to book canvassing. During the course of her work, she covers a vast area of Northern California, as far east as Nevada City and as far north as Eureka.

The tension between being a female book canvasser and a reputable lady is a topic central to *Facts*, and throughout the book Styer wrestles

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10. Stephen Railton (2012) identifies the author of *Facts* as Harriet Wasson, born in 1842 in Wooster, Ohio, but he does not provide details on the source of this information. Randall House Rare Books Catalogue XXX lists a copy of *Facts* for sale with a description identifying the author as Harriet Wasson Styer and thanks Twain expert Ken Sanderson for this information. Throughout this article I have referred to the author as Harriet Wasson Styer as this is the name that appears on many subsequent books by the author located in WorldCat.

with others' limited views of female respectability. Her memoir opens with a story (which noticeably exists outside of an otherwise chronological and realistic account) that finds her as one of a party of women enjoying dinner at an affluent woman's home. Oblivious to Styer's occupation, the guests criticize female book canvassers. One opines, "I never could see any use in a woman tramping around through the streets, among men of all classes, going into their offices and places of business, to sell books or seek any sort of subscription; any woman having a particle of good, moral breeding would never resort to such a conspicuous mode of gaining a livelihood" (1881, 7). Another agrees: "there is no respectable woman [. . .] that sells books!" (1881, 8). Styer's reply is cut short by the guest of honor, an older, well-respected wealthy woman who reveals that she had been a book canvasser in her youth. She insists that to be a female canvasser is not an immoral act and condemns the group's callous attitude toward women who must work to survive. Styer's decision to begin her memoir with this scene emphasizes the narrow-mindedness of those who disdain female canvassers and insists on the interconnectedness of work, gender, and respectability as a major theme of her story. Although various individuals she encounters treat her kindly, repeatedly she is reminded that many consider book canvassing not simply inappropriate but shocking work for a woman. During a train ride, a friendly woman abruptly changes her demeanor upon learning of Styer's profession: "she silently marched away to the other end of the car, into another seat, where she could breathe purely as she reclined alone, free from contamination" (1881, 133). In another instance, a man tells her he sympathizes so strongly with her that if she were his sister, he would sooner murder her than let her canvass. Both interactions suggest that these individuals see a woman selling books as perilously close to a woman selling herself. Perhaps it is unsurprising that such encounters lead Styer to struggle with feelings of isolation and otherness: "being a book agent, I had not much in common with my sex" (1881, 96).<sup>11</sup> Yet in one town, her genteel, feminine behavior is commended in the local paper. Styer clearly feels vindicated by this public praise, which echoes Mrs. M. L. Rayne's description of the ideal woman canvasser: "A lady has come to Eureka as a book agent. She is affable, pleasant — a lady in every sense of the term — and never bothers anybody. Her business is made known in a quiet, lady-like way, and

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11. While all of the memoirists discuss feeling alienated from conventional society, this perspective does not lead to a greater sympathy with others who are marginalized, as evident in Likins's and Styer's xenophobic comments about Chinese and Latinos.

with no unnecessary talk” (STYER 1887, 287). Styer’s memoir shows an awareness of the gulf between the work of book canvassing and expectations about women’s behavior, as well as frustration with the hypocrisy of those who use the constraints of respectability to criticize working women.

Although all of the memoirs discuss the travel required for book canvassing, Styer’s account is especially noteworthy for its descriptions of the experiences of a woman canvasser’s trips in the West during the late nineteenth century. Where Likins documents the experience of entering male-dominated urban spaces, Styer’s work takes her into wilder terrain. Parts of her territory are rugged and challenging to navigate, including lumber camps, prospecting settlements, and mining towns. While Styer relishes the beautiful landscape of Northern California (and, similar to Likins, likely saw the travel narrative component of her memoir as part of its marketability), she also records the less glamorous aspects of her journeys, such as bed bugs and inedible food, the filthiness of stagecoach travel, and the physical difficulty of carrying many books. Most significantly, we are continually reminded that the spaces Styer moves in are not intended for her yet necessary to do her work. Upon arriving at a hotel in a small town, she is encouraged to find other lodging: “the clerk [ . . . ] told me that there were no ladies in the building — nobody but men, and some of them very rough” (1881, 115). Often, she is the lone woman traveler on a stagecoach or in a train car. This observation frequently is followed by a declaration of being unafraid, yet inevitably it reminds readers of the persistent danger of Styer’s work. At a lumber camp, her calculated sales pitch may be intentionally seductive to its male customers, but it also emphasizes the very real risks she takes in canvassing: “surely [ . . . ] you will not refuse to buy a little book from the only woman that ever visited you here, coming so far and alone into this forest of trees and men, just to give you an opportunity to purchase the most popular books published” (1881, 242). Styer’s account depicts how travel was both an attraction and liability for women canvassers, presenting potential risks as well as an opportunity for movement and freedom few other jobs could offer.

## Conclusion

During the mid-nineteenth century, westward expansion, improving means of transportation, an increasingly literate population, and technological advances enabled the rise of subscription publishing. These publishers and the canvassers they employed worked to bring books to those who lived in

places where they had limited access to reading material, and in the process tapped into the American conception of books as both a symbol of and opportunity for learning, upward mobility, and cultural currency. Female book canvassers were part of a broader shift that saw more women entering the workforce during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and for those who sought out this employment, canvassing offered freedom, flexibility, and potentially attractive compensation. Yet it also was grueling and precarious work. The memoirs of Dumond, Likins, and Styer not only offer permanence of a "ghostly trade", but in their specificity identify and humanize the anonymous canvasser and her efforts, providing information unavailable elsewhere (STERN 1992, vii). Moving beyond the stereotype of the literacy advocate or dishonest cheat, their accounts instead show the physical, psychological, and emotional exertion canvassing demanded. They document both the advantages and disadvantages of canvassing, including the satisfaction of business success, the pleasures and pains of travel, and the anxiety of dealing with harassment and disapproval. Most significantly, their narratives make plain the effort necessary to navigate gender norms while doing work that many saw as defying them.

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