

TK: In Lowell, Massachusetts, 1864

Atul: Asa Mercer was recruiting young women to come out West to Washington Territory. They needed teachers, he said, and fine women to instill good values in the town's growing youth population.

TK: Within weeks, Lizzie Ordway along with 10 other young women embarked on a three-month journey with Mercer to start a new life in Seattle.

Atul: What could have led them to pack up and leave their lives in Massachusetts behind? And trust the words of this seemingly random man?

TK: And what were Mercer's true motivations for bringing them out West?

(theme music plays)

Voice A: Seattle is—

Voice B: Well, we don't use umbrellas.

Voice C: Coffee.

Voice A: Computers?

Voice C: It's a city with a needle

Voice B: Home to sasquatch

Voice D: Home to the Museum of History and Industry.

Voice B: Innovation

Voice C: Rain

Voice A: A story

Voice D: A history

(music fades out underneath)

Voice 2: My name's Atul.

Voice 1: and I'm TK. We're Youth Advisors at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle.

ATUL: And this is Rainy Day History, pre-recorded at MOHAI. In this first season, we're exploring inclusion, exclusion, objects, people, and how the Seattle we know now - the questions we grapple with now about what it means to be a Seattleite—

TK: Are all part of a bigger story. Enjoy the show...whether it's raining outside, or not.

(sound of rain fades in and out)

ATUL: 11 intrepid women agreed to join Asa Mercer on this 1864 journey to Seattle. The trip wasn't just long, it was...

TK: expensive...

Atul: Asa asked each woman to pay \$250 for their passage

TK: dangerous...

Atul: (given the backdrop of the Civil War)

TK: and complicated...

Atul: the 8 women actually from Lowell took a train to New York City where they were joined by 3 women from Pepperell, Massachusetts.

TK: There they boarded a ship named *Illinois*, which get this, didn't go anywhere near Illinois. It went down to Panama, where the women and Mercer stayed for a week in a hotel. Before this, most of the women had probably never left the northeast and now here they were in another country.

ATUL: From there, the *S.S. America* brought them up to San Francisco, where they finally boarded a lumber ship to Puget Sound.

(audible sigh)

TK: Somewhere along the journey from Massachusetts to Seattle, a sailor made a wooden keepsake box for Lizzie Ordway, with her name carved out of the top of the box. It's intricate but sturdy - strong enough to travel across the oceans as Lizzie did.

Atul: It rests in the "Getting Started" section of *True Northwest: The Seattle Journey*, MOHAI's core exhibit.

TK: It's not too far from Kikisoblu's wooden cane actually, which we discussed in Episode 1

Atul: And which you should go listen to!

TK: Gotta love a shameless plug!

Atul: But really, do listen - because these two stories run sort of parallel to each other, and although they are often told separately, they are intertwined in interesting ways.

TK: Not much is known about Lizzie, or many of the women, before their time in Seattle. Their stories, as recorded in the history books, starts with their travels.

ATUL: The women who went with him were known as the Mercer Girls.

TK: Those making the trip were young, bold, and bright. Most were in their early 20s, some even younger, as young as 15. Lizzie, the eldest at 35, was already a teacher in Lowell.

Atul: We don't know exactly what motivated each of these women to go with Mercer. But we do know some of the kinds of things he said to try and convince them, like promising honorable work in schools and good wages, in a fledgling city, and that they'd be the moral compass of a new frontier. Mercer was the newly elected president of the University of Washington, and therefore seemed credible in his plea for help educating the growing population of children and young people in Seattle.

TK: Historian Lorraine McCounaghy offers various possible reasons why some might have chosen to take a chance on Mercer's offer, such as a sense of patriotic duty to develop the West or an educational duty to redeem and uplift the local population, but also personal curiosity, ambition, and a belief that "the West seemed to be a place where the energetic could succeed."

Atul: Mercer also specifically targeted places like Lowell, a textile mill town that because of the Civil War, was low on both jobs and men.

TK: Mercer also likely downplayed the rough and tumble nature of Seattle at the time, which was a small but booming pioneer town.

Atul: Yeah, the Seattle that awaited these women was very different than the one that we know today...

(Jaunty piano music rises and falls)

TK: In the 1860s, Washington was not yet a state. It had recently been declared a separate territory from Oregon *and* the Point Elliott Treaty had just been signed, both in 1855.

Atul: In case you need a refresher from last episode, the Point Elliot Treaty was a lands settlement treaty between the United States government and some of the Coast Salish tribes in the greater Puget Sound area, one of 13 such treaties with Native American tribes in what is now Washington state. The treaty established the Suquamish Port Madison, Tulalip, Swinomish, and Lummi reservations, as well as the reserved fishing rights for Native people on their usual and accustomed lands.

TK: These treaties were manipulative, and subsequent laws banned many tribes from living on their ancestral lands, though many refused to leave, particularly in Seattle, where labor in the sawmills was abundant.

Atul: A lot of the town's early economy in the 1860s and 70s was focused on harnessing natural resources like logging, coal mining, and fishing. These industries relied heavily on migrant workers, and as such, the population size changed depending on the season.

TK: In addition to Native Americans, these industries employed Chinese laborers who first came to the Northwest in this time period and establish Seattle's first Chinatown. American workers from out east were also moving into the area. Though these American settlers were mostly white, by 1870 about a dozen African Americans had settled in Seattle, finding work along the way based on travelcraft skills like barbers, cooks, porters, and ship stewards.

Atul: It was a rapidly growing town. In 1865 around 250 people lived in Seattle, but by 1880 that number had jumped to some 3,500 residents.

TK: Young, unmarried men were also as common as the rain in 1864. Two thirds of the population, to be exact! And generally, men outnumbered women 9 to 1.

Atul: But some Seattleites were determined to change this.

TK: Right. Asa Mercer wasn't just looking for teachers. At this time teaching was generally considered a job for unmarried women. He was looking for brides, and looking for well-raised women to civilize Seattle.

TK: We all know that the word "civilized" has particularly dangerous connotations at this time, given that populations that weren't of European descent, like the Duwamish, were often referred to as "uncivilized". Some were worried about the lack of white women in Seattle would encourage interracial marriage, and some worried about the vices that having a mostly transient, bachelor population would bring to town.

ATUL: I'm a bachelor. You calling me uncivilized?

TK: I am *not*, there are much better insults for you, Atul...

Atul: wowwww....

TK: Asa Mercer was one of those people that considered Seattle uncivilized at the time. He felt that it was necessary to recruit women from the east to venture out to the west—

ATUL: To make the untamed town a civil city.

TK: That has a nice ring to it, Atul.

Atul: Don't thank me, thank our writers.

TK: That's right. He also believed that more women would smooth out the rough and tumble town, serve as teachers, and also -

ATUL: Get married!

TK: You sound oddly excited about that, Atul.

ATUL: Not excited, just really amused. Think about how ridiculous it sounds. He actually wanted to recruit women to come to Seattle to get married.

TK: A little ridiculous, and a little disturbing, I think. In one way, it's an opportunity for women to go out west and make their own life, which is good...but in another, he was treating them like property to be imported from east to west.

ATUL: It's a telling story of how Seattle's population and demographics weren't just happenstance. They were intentional!

TK: Although, I'm not sure how much 11 women were really going to change the Seattle demographic.

ATUL: That's what I mean, it's just ridiculous! Although when Mercer cooked up the idea, he had planned on having many more than 11 women come. On his second trip to recruit women, he intended for hundreds to join him, though in the end only 34 came.

TK: You're right about intentional, too. Bringing women over to the west was also part of a larger campaign to grow the population of Washington Territory. The federal government was on a mission to expand the union, which the treaty making process, Native reservation system, and land grants to settlers supported. The local settler community also had their eye on statehood, for which certain population requirements had to be met. This not only encouraged pushing Native people off their lands, but also instilled a desire for a more stable, permanent, and family-based population.

(music rises and falls again)

ATUL: So what happened to Lizzie Ordway after she got here?

TK: Soon after arriving, Ordway was chosen to open the *first* public school in Seattle, the Central School, and serve as its first and (for a while) only teacher.

ATUL: The Central School was for people of all ages and more than 100 students attended class on the first day of school, a surprisingly large number of students if you consider that school was non-compulsory.

TK: Throughout her life here, Ordway taught in Coupeville, at the Port Madison School, in Port Blakely, and she served as the elected superintendent of Kitsap County for eight years, from 1881 to 1890.

ATUL: Basically, Lizzy Ordway was a big deal!

TK: Lizzy Ordway was part of a whole generation of female teachers who filled newly founded public schools nationally in the 1850s. They expanded education from a privilege for the elite to a right for the masses. This expansion, in some ways, mirrored expansion in Seattle.

ATUL: As it was growing from a pioneer town to an actual city, it needed public infrastructure and resources, like a newspaper, university, and public schools.

TK: Even though quote-unquote "importing" women from the east sounds pretty creepy, it was a mark that Seattle was changing, and an important part of Seattle reckoning with what it meant to be a city. That a city was more than just a bunch of men fishing...

ATUL: It was also a bunch of women teaching!

TK: And, much, much, more.

Ordway, and other Mercer Girls, were active suffragists before they even left home. This was work that she brought with her to Seattle. Washington Territory went back and forth on the topic of women's suffrage, a matter of who got to be excluded and included in the democracy of the city.

Atul: And in the middle of all of this, was the unbeatable Lizzie Ordway. She was an active women's rights advocate and worked with Susan B. Anthony to form Seattle's Female Suffrage League that frequently lobbied in Olympia. And in 1883, women in Washington Territory gained the right to vote, but the Washington Territorial Supreme Court later voided the decision in 1887. It wasn't until 1910 that Washington women finally gained suffrage again.

TK: But even then, Washington law only allowed people who could read and speak English the right to vote, and Asian immigrants and Native American women who were subject to restrictive citizenship laws were also denied the right to vote.

ATUL: Ordway died on September 11, 1897 at 69 years old, just 13 years before women got the right to vote in Washington.

TK: While Lizzy Ordway is often remembered as "The Mercer Girl who reserved her affection for her students"

ATUL: because she was the only one to never marry

TK: She was much more than a Mercer Girl and a husbandless woman. She spent her life teaching students in the Puget Sound area, was fundamental to the education in Seattle, and an active suffragist.

Lizzie Ordway and other Mercer Girls shaped Seattle as educators, activists, and prominent early Seattleites. Their arrival also marked a turning point on Seattle's aspirational journey from pioneer town to big city.

Although they were thanked for their quote un quote "self-sacrificing spirit they had manifested in leaving the loved firesides of happy homes to plod life's weary way on this North Western coast."

ATUL: Life's weary way has a nice ring to it.

TK: Yeah, and there's something important in how poetic it is—the women really gave up everything in their life to become Mercer Girls. But, anyways... their story has been trivialized in popular media, as illustrated by the 1960s sitcom, *Here Come the Brides*, which paints a cartoonish, hokey view of these women's journeys, and of Seattle at the time.

(ATUL hums a line of "here comes the bride")

ATUL: What, TK?

TK: Well, I just think that sort of cartoonish view of looking at it really ignores the historical importance of the story. The women left their lives behind, and went to a new place, where they continued to have agency in shaping new lives.

ATUL: Of course! I just never miss out on an opportunity to hum...I know what you mean.

TK: Thanks.

The pioneer town with high hopes narrative is also soooo pervasive in Seattle history.

Atul: Yeah. Which sort of serves to tell a certain kind of story about Seattle, and draw boundaries around who is included in the founding stories of Seattle, doesn't it?

TK: And what we've found in this episode is that this narrative has been used since settlers first arrived to market Seattle to other settlers, and some of the ways these founding stories are tied to national events and intentional campaigns to expel and attract specific groups of people from and to this area.

(flute and piano music comes in and plays out underneath)

TK: Thanks for listening to the podcast.

ATUL: We hope you enjoyed what you learned. If you want to learn more, come visit the museum in sunny South Lake Union, Seattle, or visit the MOHAI website at mohai.org/ (that's m-o-h-a-i-dot-org)

TK: Come back next week for another episode of Rainy Day History to take a big leap forward in history to the creation of Asian communities in the early 20th century and the sad story of Japanese Incarceration.

Atul: Until next time.

(jaunty piano music comes in and plays out underneath)

This is Finch. I'm one of our editors here with the credits. This episode was researched by Julia, written by Andrea and Leela, and recorded by Emily T.

Our editors are Grace and myself. I wrote the theme music and performed it along with Tyler and friend of the pod Sylvie Wang. Our logo was designed by Grace. Marketing help came from Julia, Tyler, and Grace.

Special thanks goes out to Pei Pei, Chris, Tori, and our beloved Emily T: the one who gets angry about planes *(laughs)*. See you next time, on the Rainy Day History podcast!