

Comprehension

Genre

A **Biography** tells the story of a person's life and is written by another person.



Evaluate

Fact and Opinion

As you read, use your Fact and Opinion Chart.

Fact	Opinion

Read to Find Out

What opinions does the author give about Esther Morris?

WHEN ESTHER MORRIS HEADED WEST



BY CONNIE NORDHIEM WOOLDRIDGE
ILLUSTRATED BY JACQUELINE ROGERS





Her name was Esther Mae Hobart McQuigg Slack Morris, and in 1869 she headed out to South Pass City in the Wyoming Territory. She was fifty-five years old.

South Pass City was a place that sprouted out of nearly nothing at the mention of the word “gold.” The space around it was large and wide open. That was a good thing because Mrs. Morris was a large woman with wide-open ideas that needed more room than could be had in New York or Illinois, where she’d come from. You see, she thought a woman should be able to vote and hold office, the same as a man.

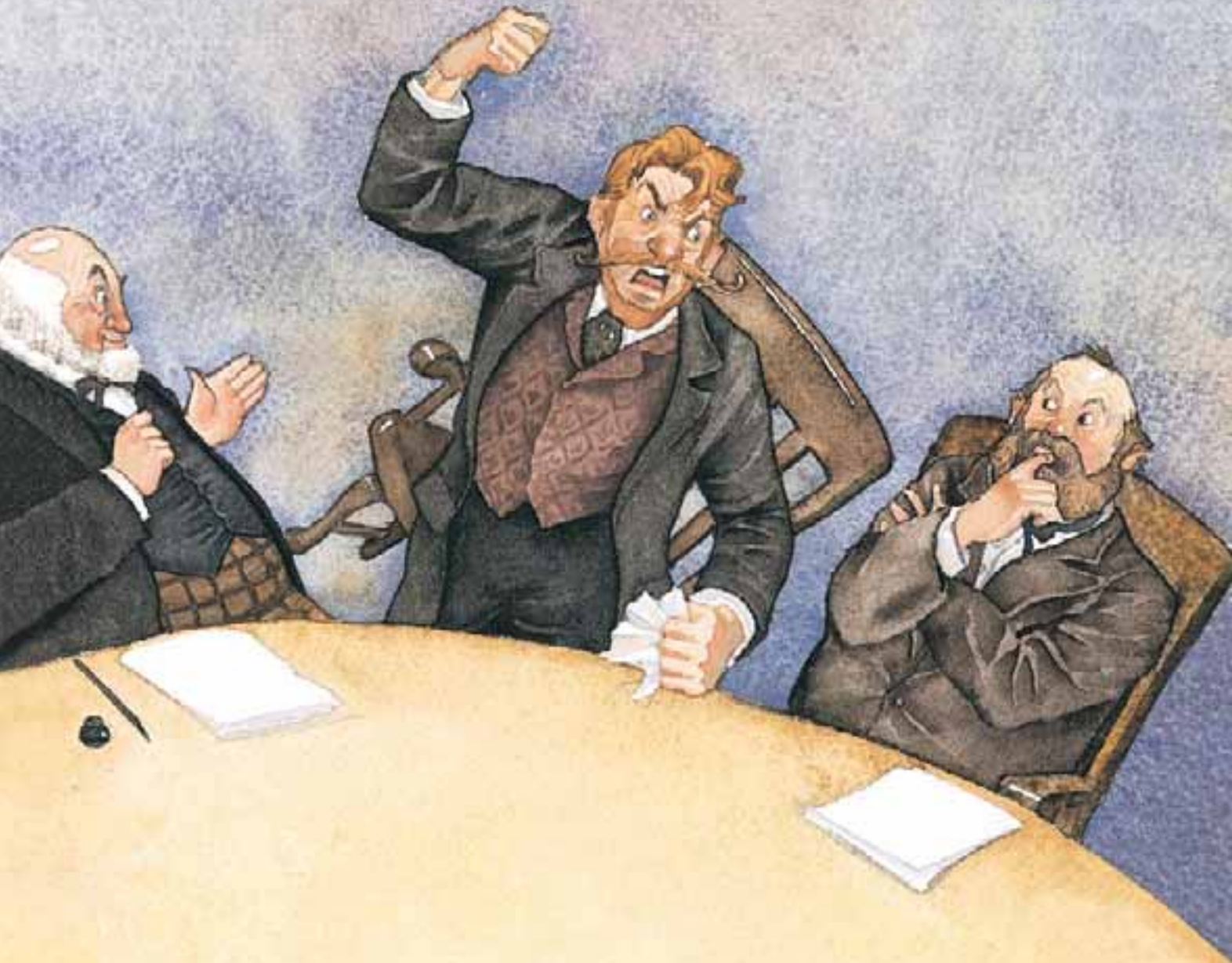


Fact and Opinion

Find one example of fact and one of opinion on this page.

After she got herself settled in South Pass City, she paid a call on a man who had already argued hard for the same new and crazy-sounding idea she was bringing in from the East. That man was **Colonel** William Bright, and he thought women's being able to vote and hold office made all kinds of sense. Since he was an elected member of the Wyoming Territory Council, he proposed An Act to Grant to the Women of the Wyoming Territory the Right of Suffrage and to Hold Office.





Colonel Bright was opposed by a feisty young lawyer named Benjamin Sheeks, another **representative** from South Pass City, who thought the idea was hogwash. His plan was to keep the thing from ever being voted on at all. He made a motion to **postpone** discussion until July Fourth, which any fool knew was a holiday.



But Mr. Ben Sheeks lost the day, and the heretofore unheard-of up and happened. In the closing months of 1869, a **legislature** full of men voted to give the women of Wyoming rights no other women in the world had: They could vote and hold office the same as men.

“The Deed Is Done,” read one newspaper. “Ladies, Prepare Your Ballots!” read another. “Reckless Copperheads!” read a third, referring to the legislators who’d voted in such a fool thing. Back in South Pass City, the justice of the peace resigned.



Fact and Opinion

One newspaper had the headline “Reckless Copperheads!” Is this a fact or an opinion? How do you know?



Now that women had the right to vote, it was time to prove they could hold office just as well. Mrs. Morris had no hankering for power or highfalutin titles. But she knew an idea—even one voted into law—wasn't worth a hill of beans as long as it stayed words on a page. Her boys were grown and it was time to step away from her cooking and gardening for a spell and do a thing that might help women coming along later on. So Mrs. Morris applied for the position of South Pass City Justice of the Peace. The whole Wyoming Territory let out a gasp. But the only fellow who opposed her for the position failed to **qualify**. So there she was: a judge. And that made her the first female in the United States to hold a public office.



A test of her ability came early on from the very man she was replacing. He refused to hand over the court docket. He didn't think Mrs. Morris should have it. He didn't think any woman should have it.

"You can keep your dirty docket," Mrs. Morris told him, and got herself a nice clean one.

Then there was the time young Ben Sheeks, back to lawyering, argued a case in her court. The opposing **attorney** was having a heyday picking at every little thing and getting Mr. Sheeks's dander up real good. After he'd had about all he could take, Mr. Sheeks escorted his opponent out of the room when it didn't appear the fellow was of a mind to go.

When Mr. Sheeks came back into the courtroom, he knew he'd gone and done it. His views on the woman question were no secret and here he'd misbehaved in front of the first woman judge in the country. The situation called for humbleness and that was not a thing that came easy to Ben Sheeks.

"Your honor," he said, "I apologize for my behavior and I **submit** to any punishment you might inflict. I was in contempt."

Mrs. Morris was not educated in the fine points of the law. But she'd raised three sons in rough-and-tumble places, and she knew a thing or two about common-sense fairness. "Your behavior was justified, Mr. Sheeks," was all she said. And that was an end to it.

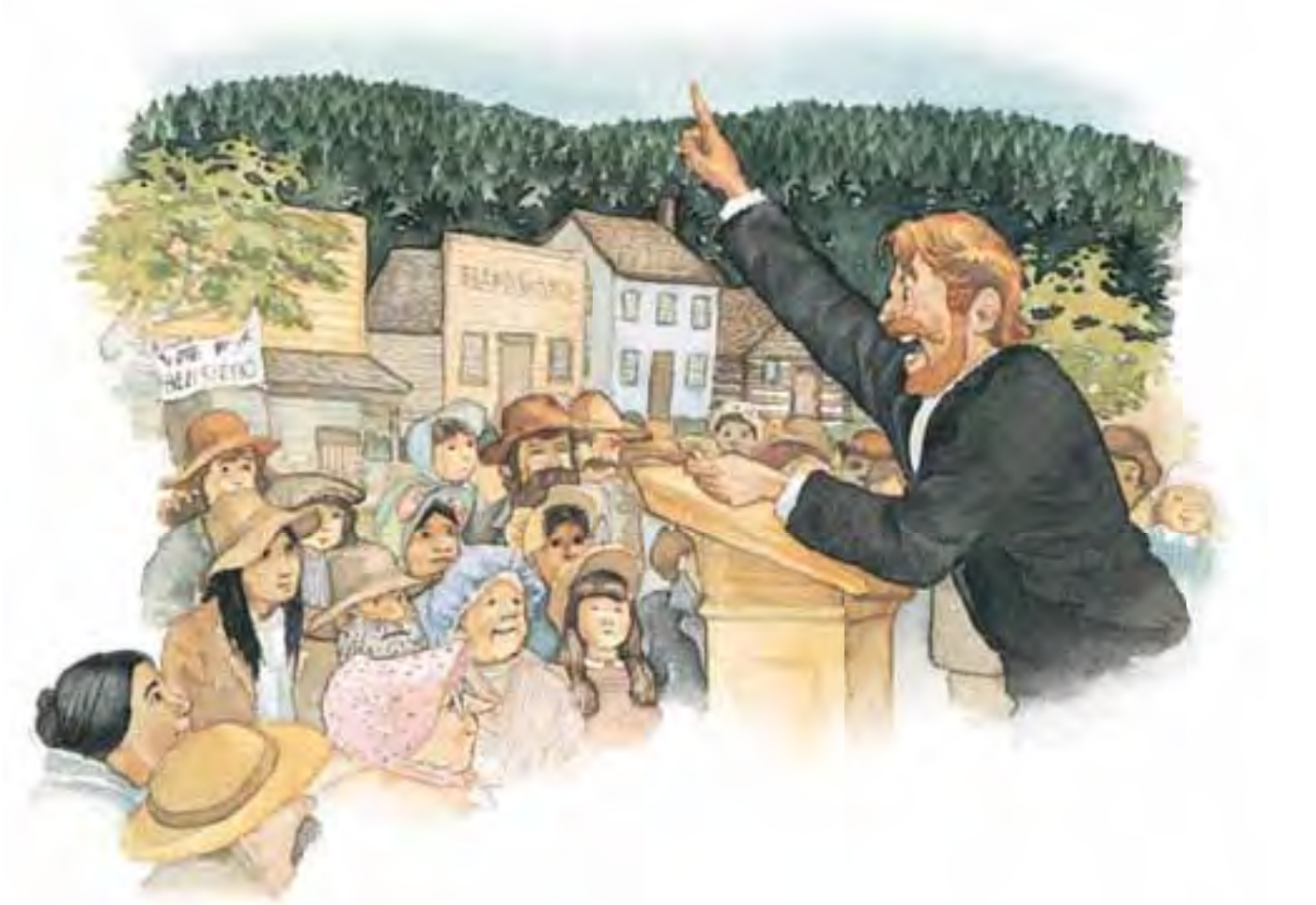
Along with seven other South Pass City women, the judge cast her vote for the very first time on September 6, 1870. She later claimed she had her personal physician by her side, and he determined the operation of voting had no ill effects on a woman's health.

Her term ended the following month. "My position as justice of the peace was a test to woman's ability to hold public office," she said, "and I feel that my work has been

satisfactory, although I have often regretted I was not better qualified to fill the position. Like all pioneers, I have labored more in faith and hope." When she stepped down from the bench, Mrs. Morris handed the court docket over to the same judge who wouldn't turn his loose eight months before.

The gold fever that had brought three thousand people to South Pass City died down. Colonel Bright moved to Denver and then finished out his days in Washington, D.C.



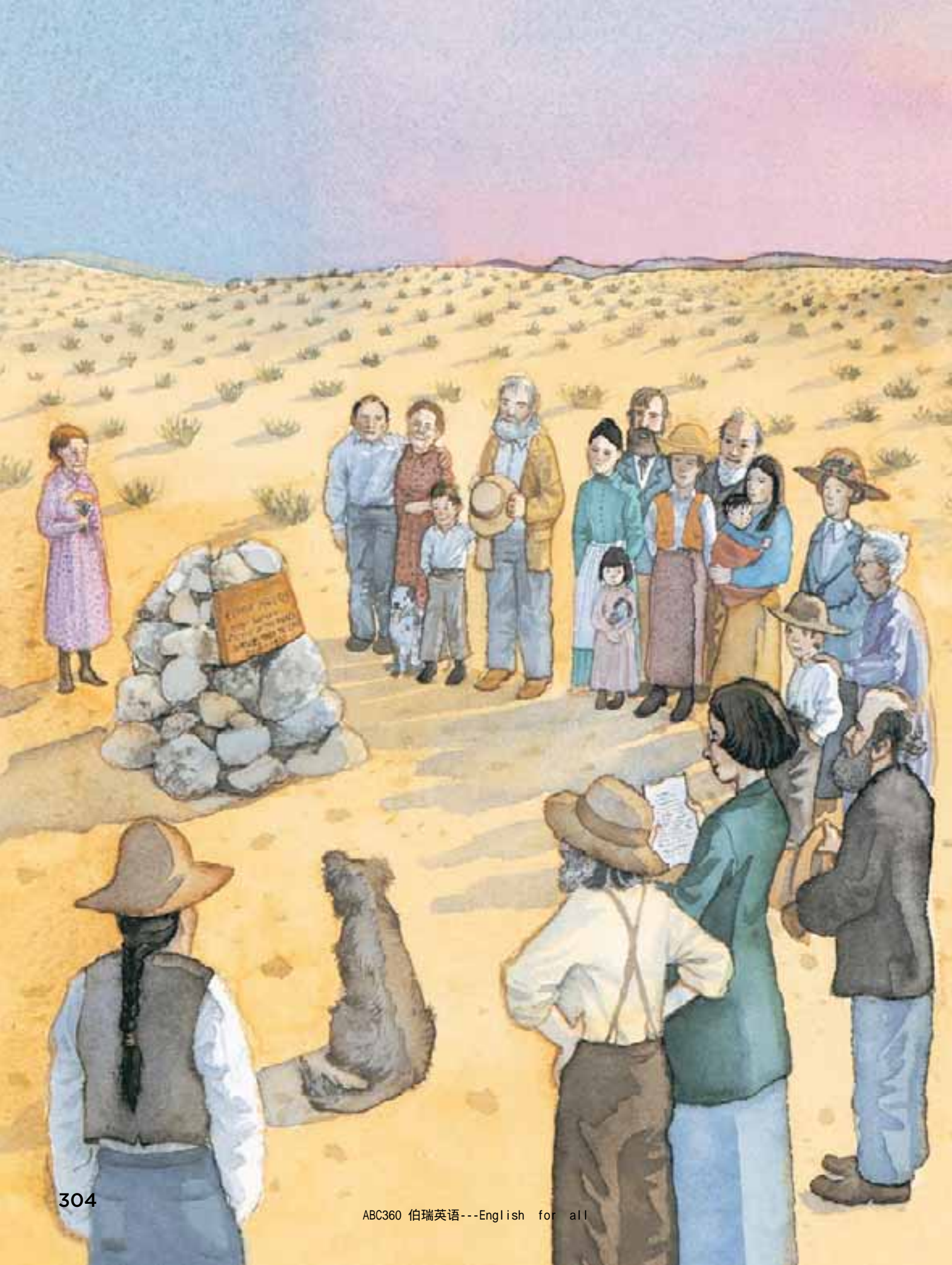


Ben Sheeks headed for Salt Lake City and then west to Washington State. Somewhere along the way he took up the crazy notion that women should be able to vote and hold office the same as men.

Mrs. Morris moved to Laramie, Wyoming, and then on to Cheyenne. She was close to ninety when she died.

In the summer of 1920, a professor from the University of Wyoming made her way out to what was left of South Pass City. She got herself a wheelbarrow and took a stone from the broken-down home of William Bright, who once had the courage to propose a crazy new idea.

She took another stone from the home of Esther Morris, who had the courage to show how the idea looked in the living of it. She took a third from the home of Ben Sheeks, who hated the idea, saw how it looked in the living, and had the courage to change his way of thinking.



The professor piled the stones into a monument and invited the remaining inhabitants of South Pass City to a dedication ceremony. As the sun sank behind the mountains, nineteen human beings, two dogs, and a cow remembered for a moment that once in time a thing bigger and better than gold had happened here.

In Washington, D.C., later that same summer of 1920, the Secretary of State announced a change to the United States Constitution. He said women in all states were now allowed to vote, the same as men.

It wasn't a new idea for the state of Wyoming. The folks back East just took a little longer getting to it is all.



HEADING WEST WITH CONNIE NORDHIELM WOOLDRIDGE AND JACQUELINE ROGERS

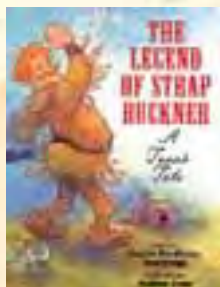
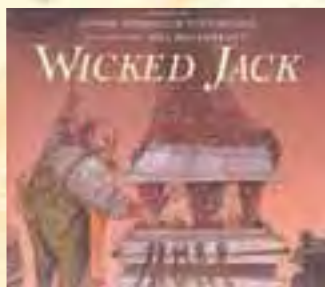


Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge tried a lot of things before she started writing. She studied Greek culture and archaeology in Greece, worked as a flight attendant, and taught school in Korea. But when Connie started writing, she knew she found the right job. She loves writing stories that tell children what life was like before they were born and how much life has changed.

Jacqueline Rogers grew up as the youngest child in a family of artists. While growing up she followed her mom to her sculpture class and her sisters to their drawing classes. When Jacqueline started drawing on her own, she focused on horses. Today she illustrates children's books because it allows her to be most creative. "It pushes me and scares me and that makes my work more exciting," she says.



Other books by Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge: *Wicked Jack* and *The Legend of Strap Buckner*



Author's Purpose

Does Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge admire Esther Morris? What details from the story indicate the author's opinion of her subject?



Find out more about Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge and Jacqueline Rogers at www.macmillanmh.com



Comprehension Check



Summarize

Use your Fact and Opinion Chart to help you write a summary of *When Esther Morris Headed West*. Opinions you have about events in the selection should not appear in your summary.

Fact	Opinion



Think and Compare

1. Identify two facts in the story about Esther Morris's term as a judge. Then identify two opinions that she had about herself. Do you agree or disagree with Morris's opinions? Explain your answer. **Evaluate: Fact and Opinion**
2. Reread page 305. What is the "thing bigger and better than gold" that happened? Explain why the author compares this event to gold. **Analyze**
3. What would you have done to help women get the right to vote? What would you have said to the Wyoming **legislature**? **Evaluate**
4. Explain why it takes courage to change people's way of thinking. **Synthesize**
5. Reread "Your Vote, Your Voice" on pages 292–293. Compare and contrast women's desire to vote in Wyoming in 1869 with the decrease in voting in recent years. Find evidence from both selections to support your answer. **Reading/Writing Across Texts**

