

# **"I SUPPOSE I AM MY OWN GIRL NOW"**

## **THE DIARY OF NANCY HOLMES CORSE, ENOSBURG, VERMONT, 1858-1859**

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Nancy Holmes Corse was born to John and Sarah Holmes on March 27, 1840 in Enosburg Township, Franklin County, Vermont. This rural area has changed little since John Holmes purchased land in 1833. County records and census lists indicate that the Holmes family lived in the area since 1811. According to Janice Fleury Geraw's *Enosburg, Vermont*, Enosburg was a community where farmers depended largely on their own self-sufficiency, individual ambition, and industry (26). By 1850 John Holmes lived on a modest farm with his wife and three children: Ephraim, 13; Nancy, 10; and John Silas, 7.<sup>1</sup> When John Holmes died in 1856, Nancy's position shifted from that of daughter under a father's economic protection to hired help at the mercy of a brother. Nancy Holmes Corse kept a diary from March 27, 1858 to May 4, 1859, recording the conflicts that ensued after her father's death.

By the early twentieth century, the diary became part of a private collection owned by Robert M. Snyder of Missouri and was donated to the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1937 as part of 14,000 documents, maps, and diaries focusing on the Trans-Mississippi westward movement. This 145-year-old handwritten manuscript appears to be a simple notebook measuring 6.5 by 7.5 inches, similar to composition books used by students today. Front and back covers are constructed with poster board-type material, covered with a marbled brown pattern. Black tape binds the book together on the exterior, and close examination reveals a raised pattern on the outer spine that has nearly worn off over the years. Placed on a hard surface, the book lies flat when opened, enabling the diarist to write on the entire page from the center to the margins. The well-preserved pages are lined for writing, and columns appear on the left side of each page. The diarist used pen and ink and referred to the rough paper that made it difficult to write and spoiled her pens. She referred to the diary as a "book" on the title page and "some kind of Memorandum" in the first entry (3).

During the thirteen-month period covered by the diary, Nancy spent a few moments every evening writing in her book. She faithfully recorded weather conditions and household chores until it was too dark to see the page. She wrote down names of visitors and community members with an accuracy that makes it possible to follow her trail along census records and maps as she walked up the country road to town. Prayer meetings, Sabbath School, Temperance lectures, funerals, marriages, and baptisms are recorded, but this diary holds greater significance than a chronicle of names and dates.

Nancy conformed somewhat to the format of blank pocket-sized diaries popular in the mid to late nineteenth century. Preprinted diaries displayed the days of the week on each page, ranging from one to three days per page. Publishers conflated the diary and almanac, often inserting pages at the front detailing the calendar year, postage costs, high and low tide, and religious holidays. In their simplest form, purchased diaries included a title page in front with account pages for business trans-

actions placed at the back. Pocket diaries purchased from local merchants were usually small, and the rigid format offered barely enough space to record visitors and the number of pies baked on a given day. Nancy's was not a purchased diary; it was a simple notebook, perhaps a school ledger used for ciphering. The absence of preprinted headings allowed Nancy to appropriate features of preprinted diaries while simultaneously freeing her to lengthen entries and shape the diary according to her individual needs.

For decades scholars have studied nineteenth-century women's diaries not only as family and historical records but as evidence of the diarist's personal and economic value. Suzanne Bunkers and Cynthia Huff's *Inscribing the Daily* suggests diaries should be studied as autobiography, where women "lay bare power relations" and employ diary writing to "transform themselves and their culture" (8). Margo Culley views diaries as "diary literature," a tool through which women acted out against devaluation by blending the historical record with imaginative personal narrative. However, few studies have focused on the rich complexity of girls' diaries for clues as to how they valued themselves as economic agents, and no studies have placed girls' diaries alongside women's as sites for exploring the use of fictional elements in personal narrative.

My study breaks new ground by examining a nineteenth-century girl's diary for evidence of economic agency. The diary becomes a stage upon which Nancy acts out inner conflicts and tests a growing autonomy—it was her declaration of independence. Tension often centers on economic issues and her desire to be valued by family and community members. At the same time, Nancy consciously or unconsciously assumes elements of fiction to both cope with sudden loss and diminished status and to memorialize her economic value. Nancy's diary narrates the story that census records and historians have yet to tell: she sells her black bonnet for a dollar; she makes and markets butter; she earns wages while doing domestic work for a neighbor; she barter for cloth with homemade socks; and she learns to make shoes. Diaries such as these must be preserved; otherwise girls' voices which should be heard by young women today will be lost.

### **From Debtor to Economic Agent**

Diaries written before 1900 were generally written as semi-public documents, and early diarists were family and social historians (Culley 4). Diarists functioned primarily as chroniclers of events and activities, and nineteenth-century diaries contained scant evidence of "self." Marion Yeates's "Beyond 'Triffles'" suggests readers of diaries should consider the significance of "the 'trifling' dailiness of women's lives" (152). Nancy fulfills her role as chronicler of what modern readers might consider "triffles" and at the same time imparts a sense of "self." As Barbara Crowther notes, diaries of girls are indeed a "mixture of chronicling and some reflection" (205), yet "how much more complex is their discourse and function" (197). Daily entries serve as a mask to expose the "dim outline of a process that produced female devaluation" and of "structures that enforced her subordination" (Yeates 155). Nancy's diary serves as what Yeates refers to as a "safe space" for expression denied her in the public realm (153). The diarist uses personal narrative as an "ever-listening ear" (Crowther 205). Jane Hunter notes how girls used diaries as "protected spaces" where they "charted a middle way between the fiery rebel and the good daughter" (59). Thus, Nancy's record represents a private strategy for dealing with complex feelings as she struggled for recognition in the family and sought to distinguish her role as

financial contributor to the household. Diary keeping allowed Nancy to navigate the changing present, deal with harsh treatment and injustice, and gain economic independence.

The two accounts pages that frame the diary establish it as a record of conflict and independence before Nancy declares in the first entry, “I suppose I am my own girl now and can do as I am a mind to” (3). She places one accounts page, a list of debts in loosely formatted columns, at the beginning, and the other, a running paragraph, at the back. Nancy titled the first accounts page “Comencing 27 March 1858 Debtor to Ephraim Holmes” (1). This is the first time Ephraim is mentioned in the diary, but Nancy does not identify her relationship beyond that of debtor. Census records, however, show that Ephraim is Nancy’s older brother. Pens, paper and clothing are among the debts listed, items not typically considered debt within the family. Nancy started the list on her birthday, corresponding with the first day of the diary, and continued to record debt until August 14, shortly before she boarded in town to attend school.

The last accounts page, titled simply “Enosburg. September 10, 1858” (48), reflects payments made to individuals and money owed to her. While the first accounts page uses columns to set off items and amounts owed, the last page contains a simple paragraph that expresses a degree of economic sovereignty: “I went up and settled with the Dr I owed him 1.25 he paid me \$10. and owes me a little over \$9 now I paid Mr Corse \$5 for board. \$1 for Phisiology” (48). The final account, dated September, appears out of chronological order and has been carefully placed at the back of the diary as a final marker. Although the corresponding entry on that day makes no mention of any significant financial event, Nancy marks September 10 as the beginning of economic independence.

These pages stress the economic theme that shapes the diary into a record of resistance and a tool to redefine relationships and manipulate reality. In the diary, she transforms her role until she is no longer a daughter but a debtor, both oppressed and tragically exploited.

Nancy’s awareness of material worth is expressed throughout the diary in such notations as the number of tubs of butter produced and the price per pound. She bartered with the Wymans and “got cloth enough for me a waist and a dress pay with socks” (23). When Mrs. Wyman visited, Nancy writes, “she mad[e] mother a cup she charged one shilling” (7). Nancy does not appear interested in the cup’s appearance, although she astutely notes the price. In another entry she writes, “I sold Mrs. Hopkins my black bonnet for 1’00 seems as that was rather cheap but she thought that was all she could give” (11).

Through diary-keeping, Nancy critiques others and presents herself as a productive member of the family, one who deserves just wages for her labor. She records daily accomplishments and transactions but also notes her ability to produce outside the domestic sphere. In spite of Ephraim’s disapproval, Nancy milked cows. After Nancy married Malcome on March 13, 1859, the couple lived with his father, a shoemaker. A few weeks later (five days before the diary ended) she writes, “I have bound a pair of shoes this makes two pair the folks say I learned very easy” (48).

In her narrative, Nancy represents herself as the injured party, mistreated by individuals as well as the legal and cultural system. She no longer enjoyed her father’s protection but lived under her brother’s control. Two years after John Holmes’s death, the estate had not been settled. Although American law had long abandoned the practice of automatically transferring all land to the oldest son (Salmon 142), Ephraim attended to the legal matters, and Nancy clearly feared she would receive nothing.

ing. Her future lay in Ephraim's hands, and the resulting tension played a key role in diary entries, often dominating the narrative. Rather than engaging in a frontal assault upon society, Nancy's resistance is "portrayed relationally" (Lensink 49), within her family. Nancy believed financial destitution was a real possibility, especially if Ephraim chose to ignore her needs. The following partial entry on June 6, 1858 casts Ephraim as a heartless villain who cheats "Fatherless Children" and neglects Nancy's basic needs: "I do not know but he is ashamed of me because I cannot dress as well as he can but he wont [sic] get anything so I do not know as I am to blame for I do as well as I can. I know he is able to have nice things and is well off but how does he get it by cheating Fatherless Children out of it but perhaps I am censuring him hard but God forbid that I should" (11). It expresses the complexity of her inner conflict, which includes not only protest against mistreatment but also an apology for entertaining rebellious thoughts.

The tension Nancy experiences with her mother, Sarah, is depicted in terms of household responsibilities, competition for public recognition, and wages. Apparently their relationship was strained, and John Holmes's death may have driven the wedge deeper. In June Nancy writes, "I have to work harder than I ought to but they hire me so I must work. I fixed my skirt this afternoon and Mother said that they did not hire me to work for myself and other girls are offered 1.50 and I have '.75'" (19). Later, on August 2, 1858, Nancy complains of being used and points out that others recognize the tension and injustice: "Mr. Chilson went home tonight and just to show how Mother uses me I will write what he told me she told him I have done some work for him and he spoke about paying me she says to him she is to work for Ephraim hand it to him but said he to me when I get the chance I shall hand it to you" (20). Nancy inserts an eyewitness account of abuse, bringing credibility to the text. By quoting Mr. Chilson, she confirms wages are being withheld and she is being used. This entry falls within the timeframe covered in the "debtor" page at the beginning of her text, and she continues to highlight her role as victim.

Nancy also evaluates her mother based upon household chores. In the following entry in late June, Nancy demonstrates her ability to work during illness, then casually mentions how much *less* work her mother completed: "I have been sick all day I never worked when I felt worse I worked over some butter that is about all I have done it finished the 7<sup>th</sup> tub I could work only a few moments at a time [. . .] Mother has done considerable she washed the dishes this morning for the first time for over two years" (16). One may interpret this comment as praise or simple observation, but read within the context of the diary it might be construed as veiled criticism. This is the only time Nancy records her mother's contribution to cleaning the house.

Additional conflicts between mother and daughter include the universal "talking to" but also competition for public recognition. In the quest for independence, Nancy sought to establish her identity in the community, creating further tension with her mother. On June 9, 1858, Nancy writes, "Mother has given me a severe talking to to day I do not know why she should do so unless she is afraid folks will think more of me than they do of her she has been talking to me about being religious and from that on to most everything. It is a hard thought for a child to think that a Mother will tell things that are absolutely false" (12).

Perhaps Sarah Holmes resented her daughter's industrious, pious behavior in the Protestant community and sought to devalue this public image. It might be possible that Sarah spoke from genuine

concern, but Nancy gives no indication of sincere motivation. When words failed, her mother exercised economic control by withholding the “cotton batten” her daughter requested in preparation for her marriage. On February 22, 1859, shortly before Nancy married Malcome Corse, she writes, “I have been telling Mother about going away she did not say much but I tried to have her let me have some cotton batten and I think if she was motherly she would let me have it but I hope God will prosper me and I shall get to be well off” (42). Again the tension within this relationship is defined in economic terms, and Nancy’s writing highlights not only her diminished position, but the hope that marriage would bring financial prosperity.

Nancy portrays her younger brother Silas as financially better off but also reckless with money. She calls him a “dreadful” boy because “he spends faster than he can earn getting ring and a watch and locket and all such kinds of things I do wish he would be steady but I do not know as he ever will be but still I keep hoping” (11). Nancy later complains, “Silas has got home last night I am not very pleased about it for he makes so much work have enough to do to pay my board without him I think and he wears fine shirts and collars every day a good deal of the time” (41). Nancy’s tone implies that as a male Silas experiences a greater freedom of movement and economy at fifteen than she enjoys at eighteen, the age of supposed independence, even though his income source is unclear.

### **Reshaping Reality in Personal Narrative**

By consciously and unconsciously selecting certain incidents and omitting others, Nancy presents a particular view of characters and circumstances that may not reflect reality. Diarists select and arrange details in a shaping process that turns reality into a kind of fiction. Daily events and experiences are viewed through the lens of the writer. Steven Kagel and Lorenza Gragmena suggest, “In diaries, the line between an accurate rendering of events and a creative manipulation of reality is not always apparent even to the diarists themselves” (42). Nancy also assumes the “persistent persona of the striving sufferer,” as Judy Nolte Lensink proposes many diarists do, and uses fiction or quoted biblical texts to support the performance (49).

Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which the diarist realized that influence, textual evidence indicates that while Nancy wrote in the unfolding present she manipulated reality to create her narrative. Diaries are “most often begun as a response to some tension or dislocation in the diarist’s life,” and “manipulating reality in a diary . . . might convert even a sense of unbearable oppression into heroism, albeit tragic heroism” (Kagel 43). Under the influence of fiction, Nancy captures words and themes from books she read and uses them to transform advice into persecution, rebellion into heroism. By placing herself within a category she calls “Fatherless children,” Nancy assumes what Kagel and Gragmena refer to as the position of tragic heroine rather than helpless girl (54). The orphan persona fits neatly with her role as tragic heroine, a role she assumes directly from the pages of fiction.

Early in the diary Nancy records reading *May Martin; or The Money Diggers* by Daniel P. Thompson, a highly romanticized fictional narrative featuring an orphan named May Martin who is mistreated by adoptive parents. At the conclusion of the tale, May’s birth father reappears and she inherits his fortune, survives kidnapping and flash floods, marries the man of her dreams, and escapes the oppressive Martins. Under the influence of this romantic tale, Nancy shapes herself as the victim-

ized heroine mistreated by her older brother and mother. Nancy does not mention that Ephraim is also one of the “Fatherless Children.” Nancy continues to portray herself as a Cinderella-among-the-ashes, claiming “Ephraim will never find any one else that will crawl round as I do” (20). Instead of protecting Nancy from devaluation and servitude, the diary reveals how mother and son joined forces to oppress her in the same way the Martins dominated May.

County documents in Enosburg indicate that John Holmes’s estate was divided equally between Nancy and her two brothers. On June 13, 1858, Nancy’s name was recorded in a probate deed that awarded her one third of John Holmes’s land and \$220, information that does not appear in the diary. County records also show Nancy H. Corse was paid \$900 in 1864 by several individuals for over 100 acres of land in her name. On July 14, one month after probate court documents were filed, Nancy records one of the longest entries in the diary. The word “settle” is barely noticeable in an orchestration of conflict, self-condemnation, and uncertainty. This appears to be the only instance in the diary where settlement is referred to, and the diarist’s knowledge may have motivated her to “write that dreadful word Trouble” when her father’s colt was about to be traded away:

Ephraim has been folish enough to swap colts with Ben Far and I am a good mind to write that dreadful word Trouble for I hate to see things going as they are I have been trying to have him settle with me but he wont and now to see Fathers colt as fat and handsome as *could be* everyone praising it and telling how fat and handsome she was and to think that it is swaped off for an old poor thing (19, emphasis in original).

When she can not voice her feelings, Nancy uses her pen to lodge an informal complaint regarding Ephraim’s poor business transaction, and the reader may wonder whether she lamented the loss of assets she hoped to share.

If Nancy was aware of the probate deed, then she chose to omit significant information from the text. Perhaps she unconsciously hid that knowledge and wrote instead of matters foremost in her mind—the uncertain future and present suffering. The omission shaped the text, and she continued to perform as victim. The reader sees only the diarist’s viewpoint recorded at the moment the pen touches the page, a viewpoint shaped by a subjective process. Just as Nancy does not speak directly of land or money in this July entry, she does not mention receiving the money spent so freely in the last accounts page on September 10.

Entries written after September 10 contain an element of freedom not expressed in prior entries, and they may be the best indicator that Nancy possessed discretionary income, implied by the decrease in conflict with family members. She moved more freely, made decisions without tension, and spent money on non-essential items. One item from the last accounts page, an ambrotype or a type of photograph which was taken during the school day, is mentioned in the diary. No longer under the watchful eye of mother or older brother, Nancy chooses how and when to spend her money. During the school term, she experiences greater freedom of movement, and conflict in the diary shifts toward school acquaintances. When school ended, and before she married Malcome, Nancy returns home and conflict resumes, once again centered on economic issues. She complains, “I do not find things as I left them it is a new fashioned way to hire a girl and give them a dollar a week and have them leave all the work for me to do.” It is difficult to discern whether she was complaining about “all the work” or the fact that someone else had been paid for doing the work while she received nothing.

Armed with the knowledge that Nancy had received or hoped to receive an inheritance, Ephraim's and Sarah's behavior appears less oppressive. Although Nancy portrays Ephraim as someone determined to cheat her out of an inheritance, he may simply have been a hardworking farmer bearing a heavy load. Nancy's discourse presents him as the tyrant, yet he continued to cut oats, build walls, aid neighbors, drive her to meetings or to town, and give her birthday gifts. Sarah Holmes may have been the real casualty. According to Janice Geraw of the Enosburg Historical Society, Sarah did not appear on the farm's legal documents; the three children were named exclusively as heirs to John Holmes's estate. Sarah may have experienced deep depression in the wake of her husband's death, with no hope for her future. In the diary, she is nameless and virtually without identity, but census records revealed her name. Consciously or unconsciously, Nancy selectively shapes her text, omitting crucial evidence and highlighting conflict.

The hardships Nancy experienced were not imagined, and the mistreatment she endured was quite real. I do not suggest that Nancy fabricated a story to invoke sympathy but rather that she appropriated elements of fiction to dramatize hardships. Nancy's diary is a powerful example of personal narrative and an eloquent testimony of one nineteenth-century girl's journey toward economic independence. One can imagine the diarist in her room, writing in the diary as darkness crept slowly upon her. With pen in hand she transformed real life characters into villains and tyrants determined to take advantage of her at every turn of the page. In her own words, Nancy expressed the purpose of her diary: "I suppose I am my own girl now and can do as I am a mind to" (3).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Members of the Holmes family appear on census records in Franklin County, Vermont, beginning with the 1810 Federal Census. John Holmes first appears on Franklin County census lists in 1840, with three other members in his household, including one female between the ages of 40 and 50, and one male and one female child, both under the age of five. The 1850 Federal Census for Franklin County, Enosburg, Vermont, lists John Holmes (38), a farmer, Sarah (43), Ephraim (14), Nancy (10), and John S. (7). Nancy mentions John Holmes and writes that she thinks of her father often. Although she writes of her mother, only the census record reveals that her name is Sarah; and although she mentions Ephraim many times in the diary, only the census record shows their relationship as siblings. Nancy's youngest brother, referred to in her diary as Silas, appears as John S. on the 1850 census. By the time of the 1860 Federal Census, Malcom (21) and Nancy Corse (20) appear on the Federal Census, living near Seth and Harriet Corse, Malcom's parents, in Enosburg; Seth Corse is listed as a shoe maker. Although the 1860 Federal Census indicates Nancy had no occupation, the diary reveals she participated in the family business by learning to make shoes.

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