

Lora Webb Nichols was born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1883. On the advice of her father's brother, the family moved to Wyoming. Lora completed four grades of elementary school, but never stopped educating herself. She read voraciously and learned about photography and accounting through correspondence courses. At the age of thirteen, she started writing a diary, which she kept until the very end of her life. She recorded daily events in it as well as poems and many of her own thoughts. Throughout her life, she maintained close ties with her family—her father Horace and mother Sylvia, who helped her look after her children, and her sister Lizzie and brother Cliff.

She was given a camera for her sixteenth birthday by Bert, a thirty-year-old miner who later became her husband. From then on, she never parted with her camera. By the year 1900, she had begun to receive paid freelance assignments. She set up her first studio with a darkroom in 1907. By then she was already the mother of two children, Albert and Sylvia. In 1910 she divorced Bert, who was violent towards the children, and four years later she married her cousin, Guy. With her second husband she had four sons: Ezra, Cliff, Frank, and Dick. During this period Lora stopped taking photographs. A visit to her mother in 1925 reignited this passion in her. She purchased property in Encampment with her own money, which was unusual at the time, and opened Rocky Mountain Studio.



Lora worked very hard to survive, for she constantly faced financial hardship throughout her life. She also fought for independence, since both of her husbands expected her to stay at home. She took on various jobs, such as at the post office and in a restaurant kitchen. She also served as the editor and publisher of *The Encampment Echo* and ran her own soda and ice-cream store, *The Sugar Bowl*.

For Lora, however, as she herself wrote in her diary, photography was the most important thing in her life. Her diaries are filled with instructions on how to develop photos in a darkroom and use a camera. Lora dreamt of turning photography into a livelihood. Unfortunately, Eastman Kodak did not license her for commercial portraits, so Lora decided to focus on photographic processing. Developing photographs for other people did not end when the process was completed: if a photograph appealed to Lora, she added it to her own private archive, noting the name of the photographer. In this way, she created a unique portrait of a place and a community. In Lora's studio, it was also possible to borrow a camera. When the Civilian Conservation Corps programme began in 1933 as part of the New Deal, providing jobs for unemployed people, many young men arrived in the town. Lora often took portraits of them and gave them a camera, asking them to take photographs while they worked and travelled across the plains and mountains around Encampment.

In 1935, when Lora was fifty-two years old, her mother died. This caused a major crisis for the photographer and overshadowed the next few years of her life. She left both her studio and her husband and moved to California. She worked as a domestic in a children's home and, years later, became its director. She continued to visit Encampment, but did not return to the town permanently until 1956, after she retired. There she met Nancy, who was 18 years old at the time. A strong bond quickly formed between them. Nancy, who, together with her parents, supported Lora until her death in 1962, recalls that Lora took photos until her very last moments. She always had a camera with her, sometimes even two, because "you never know when there'll be an elephant down the street."