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Women Who Saw the Elephant: The California Gold Rush

John Sutter left Sweden with a dream, a dream of building a city of Swedish immigrants. Sutter settled in California, became a Mexican citizen, and got enough land grants to build his dream city. Sutter found investors and was on his way to fame and fortune when disaster struck. In the year 1848 a man named James Marshall made a terrific discovery.¹ Marshall was building a sawmill on land belonging to another man named John Sutter. His crew was digging a ditch when they found a rock that was different from the rest, Marshall looked at it and said, "I think this is GOLD, but I am not sure."² The one person that is not mentioned in most historical reports of this discovery, was Elizabeth Bays Wimmer. Elizabeth was called Jennie by the locals, she was the cook for the camp. Jennie was busy making soap the day the rock was found and had a bucket of lye she was using for the soap. Jennie's husband came in with the rock and showed it to her, since no one had ever seen gold in its natural state, Jennie got an idea.

I will toss it in my lye kettle...and if this is gold, it will be gold when it comes out. I finished off my soap that day, and set it off to cool, and it stayed until morning. At the breakfast table one of the work hands raised his head from eating and said, I heard something about gold being discovered, what about it? I told him it was in my lye kettle...A plank was brought for me to lay my soap on, I cut it into chunks an nothing

¹ Kowalewski Michael. *Gold Rush: A Literary Exploration*. Heyday Books. Berkley California. 1997. 50

² Holliday J.S. *The World Rushed In*. Simon and Schuster. New York. 1981

was found. At the bottom of the pot there was potash, which I lifted with my two hands, and there was my gold as bright as can be.³

When people watch a western movie, the hero is always a man, and men are always at the forefront of the society, the women are somewhere in the back ground. The California Gold Rush was the exception. The women played a leading role in this drama. Many women went west for the gold rush, some went with their husbands, and many more traveled alone. In the 1800 an elephant was the main attraction in the circus, everyone was eager to see the elephant, the gold rush became known as going to see the elephant. Women wanted to see the elephant as much as the men, they were eager to go.⁴ The industries these women started were amazing, their contribution to the whole era was unbelievable.

The story of these women does not start after they arrived in California, it starts when they left their home in the east. One-woman Catherine Haun wrote in her diary, “it took four days to organize our company of 70 wagons and 120 persons; bringing our animals and wagons to the highest possible standard of preparedness; wash our clothes, soak several days’ supply of food, and say good bye to civilization. Owing to the cheapness of chickens and eggs, we reveled in the luxuries, carrying a big supply with us, ready cooked. (1849)” The women did all this except for the preparing of the animals and wagons. The women also had the children to care for and the daily cooking to do. ⁵

³ Jo Ann Levy. *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the Gold Rush*. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman Oklahoma. 1992. xx

⁴ Holliday 170

⁵ Levy 4

The main thought that remained in the minds of the women was Indians. None of them had ever seen an Indian, and the stories they heard were extremely scary.⁶ As the wagon train moves on, they meet many civilized Indians, and the fears lessen. The main thing that the women write about is the way the Indians dress. The Indians were nude except for a blanket over one shoulder, and a strap around the waist. They all had feathers in their hair, when a young brave killed his first bird, he placed a feather from it in his hair. There were times when Indians would catch a ride in one of the wagons, the women had no fear other than the Indians might scare the horses.⁷

The women would write letters home and mail them when the train stopped at a fort or a town. The following is an excerpt of three of the letters: Harriet Ward writes “I think that what is often termed suffering, is only a little inconvenience. I had often read and heard of the difficulties and dangers of the overland route to California. I find from experience that the pleasure thus far quite over-balances it.” The second woman Angeline Ashley writes, “I do not get tired of the journey, on the contrary, I like it better every day.” And the third Sally Hestor wrote, “When we left St. Joe my mother had to be lifted in and out of the wagon; now she walks a mile or two without stopping and gets in and out of the wagon as spry as a young girl.” It seems that the women saw this trip as an adventure more than a drudge.⁸

Cholera attacked the train when they reached the Platte River, Cholera is a disease that is caused by drinking tainted water. The pioneers would camp down stream from other camp sites, the excrements from the people would cause a bacterium to accumulate in the drinking water. It

⁶ Kowalewski 98

⁷ Levy 5

⁸ Levy 6

is estimated that 6% of the travelers died in transit. Cholera was the major cause of the deaths. This disease was not only a peril for the travelers, Cholera was all over the United States, President Taylor declared a day of prayer for the ones who had lost their lives. The women lost husbands, and children from this terrible disease. The women were just as determined to see the elephant as any of the men.⁹ None who survived the cholera turned back, what was ahead had to be better than what they left behind.

524 miles into the trip the travelers come to Chimney Rock, Margaret Frink wrote, “The road took us to the base of Chimney Rock, where we stopped for some time to satisfy our curiosity. The base is shaped like a large cone, from the top rises a tall tower or chimney, resembling the chimney on a manufacturing establishment.”¹⁰ 554 miles in they pass Scott’s Bluffs, Mariett Cummings wrote, “Passed Bluff Ruins, most beautiful, too. I made a rough draft and then I was so charmed that I could not gaze enough.”¹¹

The wagon train finally arrived in Salt Lake City, some stayed a short time, while others decided to spend the winter.¹² The Mormon community excepted the travelers and where courteous. The travelers got an endless induction into the Mormon Faith, some women received marriage proposals. Lucy Cooke wrote her sister, “I assure you we hear Mormonism from morning until night.” The winter in Salt Lake was hard on everyone, the men worked odd jobs to

⁹ Holliday 115

¹⁰ Levy 9

¹¹ Levy 9

¹² Levy 14

earn money for food, and the weather was horrible. The travelers leave Salt Lake City in early spring.¹³

The Humboldt was to be the next destination, in the sink of the Humboldt there would be water and grass for the animals.¹⁴ The desert would be looming just ahead. The Mormons had told them that the best thing was to cut as much hay as the wagon would hold and take as much water as they had barrels. The time to leave would be late afternoon and travel all night. The best thing was to only stop for short intervals to rest. The desert takes no captives, keep going and the desert comes to an end in around twenty-four hours. The Humboldt sink is 1736 miles into the trip, and the hardest forty miles that the pioneers would endure. Several of the pioneers were women who had lost their husbands to Cholera, they were traveling with a wagon load of children. These women were dependent on the generosity of the other travelers, all had become family. Sallie Hester wrote, “another ox down, the stopping of the train to unyoke the poor dying brute, to let him follow at will or drop by the wayside to die, the weary, weary tramping of man and beast, worn out with heat and famished for water, will never be erased from my memory. Just at dawn, in the distance, we had a glimpse of the Truckee River, and with it the feeling: Saved at last!”¹⁵

At 1912 miles they have reached the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The climb is done one wagon at a time, with several oxen pulling. The women and children must walk the entire way. Due to the steepness of the ascent this is a slow endeavor. When the summit is reached the

¹³ Levy 16

¹⁴ Kowalewski 99

¹⁵ Levy 20

decent is even more dangerous. The wagons are led by two oxen and heavy chains are hooked to the back, every man except the driver is pulling back on the chains to stop a run-away wagon.

When at last the people could rest, they were all exhausted.¹⁶

Reaching California, the pioneers all went their separate ways. One family Settled in Alviso, on the southern end of San Francisco bay. Another settled in Marysville, while still another went to the coast at Moss Landing. The Arcans went to Santa Crus, Abigail Arcan wrote, “ I told my husband that he could go to the mines if he wanted to. I have seen all this God-forsaken country I am going to see, for I am staying right here as long as I live, and she did.”¹⁷The people had been living in a wagon, crossing the desert and the mountains for six to nine months.

There were many women who opted to take the journey by sea, most of these were going to meet their husbands. Women were left in the east when gold fever attacked the men and the women were left to raise small children alone. The ships left the east coast daily so many women took advantage of this form of travel. The trip was filled with the danger of storms and the crossing of the Isthmus of Panama. An Isthmus is a narrow strip of land connecting two bodies of water, in Panama this is Jungle. The women traveled from New York, sailed around Florida, across the Gulf of Mexico to Panama. In Panama they disembarked from the ship and hired a guide and mules, then set out across the Isthmus, when they reached the Pacific Ocean, they boarded another ship and made way to San Francisco. Most of these women where traveling with

¹⁶ Levy 20

¹⁷ Levy 29

children, some where single women going to meet the man they would marry, or just adventurous women with gold fever. ¹⁸

A few of the single women donned male clothing, this was for safety purposes. The married ladies thought this quite unacceptable. The women disguised as men worked with the crew and blended quite well. ¹⁹ One woman wrote of her expectations of the trip, “I think if it is not too warm, it will be fine fun---sailing and riding the donkeys.” The truth was that the people had to sleep on the floor of the cargo hole of the ship, male and female together. There was not much room, so they laid side by side, which seemed quite unproper to the ladies. The absence of privacy was embarrassing to the ladies, but some took this in stride. The trip across the Isthmus started with canoe trip up the Chagres River, this leg of the trip took two to three days, they then hired mules for the rest of the trip to Panama City. Jennie Megquier was fascinated by the monkeys, alligators, and other animals. The many colors of the flowers enthralled the women, this was quite an adventure. ²⁰ Reaching Panama City, the travelers boarded another ship and sailed for San Francisco. The trip up the west coast was like the rest of the sailing, they finally reached their destination, having traveled some four months.

Reaching San Francisco, the women realize that the cost of a hotel room ranged from twenty-five to two hundred and fifty dollars a week. ²¹ Due to the cost of hotel accommodations some of the women opted to live on board the ship. ²² Everybody had gold fever and the captain and crew

¹⁸ Levy 31

¹⁹ Levy 37

²⁰ Levy 36

²¹ Levy 56

²² Levy 57

left for the gold fields upon landing, the women who decided to remain on board just set up housekeeping. One couple managed to buy a lot of land and used the wood from the ship to build a house.²³ Some couples managed to buy log cabins, while others lived in tents. The adventurous went inland to Sacramento, where they built log houses. The cabins were one or two rooms with no light except for holes that were left in the walls. Having no glass, the builders would use glass jars placed in the logs with clay. The furniture was make shift, a table would be a plank laying on two logs, with logs for stools. They would have a rock fireplace for heat, and a mattress made, of a piece of cloth filled with hay. The women would use news paper for wall paper, and pieces of cloth to line the shelves. The men would pick flowers everyday for the table and make the cabin homier. ²⁴

The women endured death as a daily occurrence, fever, scurvy, and cholera took over 1700 lives who, had died in fifteen months. Death in childbirth, was another cause, most babies would not last a year. The lack of sanitary conditions, and medical care took its toll. ²⁵Another problem that took its toll on lives was crime. One instance of this was a group of thieves that took refuge with a family. There were fifteen people living in the house, and the thieves killed them all. The group of thieves were caught and hanged. Mining is a dangerous way to get rich and many men and women lost their lives in mining accidents. ²⁶

²³ Levy 58

²⁴ Levy 64

²⁵ Levy 77

²⁶ Levy 82

Luzena Wilson was baking biscuits for her family when a miner walked by, he offered her \$5.00 for the bread. She was in shock and did not answer for a second, thinking she would say no he doubled his offer. This was the beginning of a very profitable business for Luzena Wilson.²⁷ Many women got gold fever, they would cook, sew, clean, iron, and pour drinks for it, they did what ever was needed and brought in the most money. Aunt Maria, a freed slave made a hundred dollars a week cooking for one family, opened her own boarding house, and cooked for many weddings. ²⁸ Another way the women took the gold from the men was washing clothes. Laundry was the hardest task a woman did, and the most time consuming. The first thing that had to done was haul water from the closest water source. They had to feel a large cast iron kettle with water, then haul fire wood to set a fire under the kettle. Then water had to be hauled to feel the rinse tub, this took several hours. The clothes were placed in the boiling water and stirred with a board, then scrubbed on a wash board for several minutes, placed in the rinse tub, rung out, and hung on a line to dry. The women started charging \$6.00 a dozen, some men decided to try this and where charging \$8.00 a dozen. The women made more profit because of the lower price. ²⁹Ironing was the next chore and very time consuming, the irons where just, heavy pieces of iron, with a handle across the top. These had to be placed on a hot stove until they were hot, when the iron cooled it was replaced with a hot one until the ironing was done. To remove all the wrinkles the clothes had to be sprinkled with water. A bowl of water was placed in arm's length from the ironing board, the woman would place her hand in the water and sling water on the garment.

²⁷ Levy 91

²⁸ Levy 92

²⁹ Levy 103

Depending on the number of pieces to be ironed, this could take all day. Sometimes this was included with the washing, sometimes ironing was extra. The Chinese men took over this job, some white men tried to compete but lost out.³⁰ The women of the gold rush did not lose their customers.

The women of the gold rush towns were treated with the upmost respect by all the men. Since women and children were an oddity, the men just wanted to be friendly.³¹ The children became so spoiled by the miners that their mothers had to ask that they be given no candy. The women felt safe even though their doors did not fasten.³² The men were working their claims from day light until dark and loved to drink and gamble. The biggest gamble these men made was when they gave up their careers and headed west to see the elephant. These men had been doctors, lawyers, and business men, and their wives were from well-to-do families, the relatives on both sides of the marriage thought that this was a fool's mission, but the couple left anyway.³³ The average amount of gold found was \$10.00 to \$40.00 a day, some found a nugget worth \$500 but they were few. When a man was only finding \$50.00 a week in gold and his expenses were \$18.00 a week for rent, \$6.00 a week for laundry, and meals were normally around \$5.00, he was not left with much profit.³⁴ The women did not want to tell their husbands that they were not supporting them properly, so they hid a lot of their earnings.³⁵

³⁰ Levy 105

³¹ Kowalewski 194

³² Kowalewski 195

³³ Kowalewski 19

³⁴ Levy 110

³⁵ Levy 105

There were miners who gave up on finding gold and went in to business with their wives, boarding houses were springing up everywhere. The cost of a room averaged \$18.00 to \$25.00 dollars a week, and some of the hotels had an average of 20 guest. Of course, this was a lot of work, cleaning and cooking for 20 men is a monumental task. Some couples made enough money to hire help, a cook and a waiter. One couple made \$500 and decided to invest it, they did good on the investment for a while, then the bottom dropped out of the market. The point is some people found a lot of gold and spent it on survival. Others gave up on the elephant and made more money in business ventures, and some lost. ³⁶

The main reason that most people stayed and kept trying was the freedom they had in California. There was no class distinction, no master and slave, no aristocrat and laborer, everyone was the same.³⁷ Women could don britches and shirts and work the gold fields, they could earn their own money and not be improper.³⁸ If a person behaved themselves and worked hard, they were fine. Lawyer John McCracken, wrote to his parents in Connecticut, “You cannot know the perfect freedom and independence that characterizes all our relations. Society if it exists at all is freed from the multitude of prejudices, and embarrassments and exactions that control the eastern cities.”³⁹

The people of the gold rush where hungry for entertainment and there were people who took advantage of this fact. Lola Montez was one of those people, she was a beauty, with a

³⁶ Levy 98

³⁷ Levy 108

³⁸ Levi 123

³⁹ Levy 108

flamboyant personality, and had vocal and theatrical talent.⁴⁰ When she arrived in San Francisco she was already known worldwide. Jennie Megquier was one of a thousand who was intrigued by Lola's risqué reputation, Jennie Megquier wrote in her diary, "Lola Montez is making quite a stir here now, but many say that her playing is of that character that is not proper for respectable ladies to attend but I do want to see her very much. Mr. Clark said in dancing the spider dance a favorite play of hers where she performs the antics of one with a tarantula upon their person and some thought she was obliged to look rather higher than was proper in so public a place..."⁴¹

No matter how risqué the dance was a lot of hard-earned gold found its way into her pockets. One Englishman Steven C. Massett made \$500 dollars in one-night singing, doing recitations and imitations. Catherine Hayes performed in San Francisco and left with a quarter of a million dollars. Female performers did well because the audience was mostly men.⁴² Another form of entertainment that the gold miners were more than willing to pay money for was prostitution. The French prostitutes heard of the gold rush and came over by the boat loads.⁴³ The French women could make \$16.00 for just sitting next to a man at a gambling table, to bring him luck. If a man wanted a full night, it cost him \$200 to \$250 a night. In France these women would have been street walkers.⁴⁴

Unscrupulous people started paying passage for Chinese girls to come to California for prostitution purposes, the only problem the girls did not know this until they arrived. The

⁴⁰ Levy 126

⁴¹ Levy 127

⁴² Levy 128

⁴³ Levy 151

⁴⁴ Levy 163

Chinese people were so destitute that they were selling their daughters into slavery. The girls were told that they would be mail-order brides, then on the dock they are told that they would be prostitutes.⁴⁵ This was also happening in France except that they were not sold by their parents, they were lured by the prospect of getting a rich husband. A ship would land at the dock in San Francisco with sixty French girls on board, none of the women had payed a fare, they were sold to any man with cost of the fare.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Kowalewski 438

⁴⁶ Levy 163

