NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

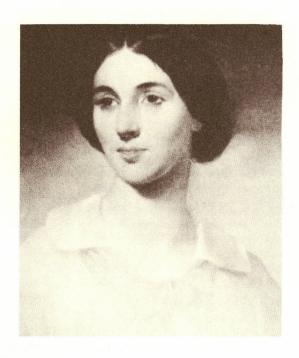
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JESSIE BENTON FREMONT, Illustration by Honi Werner for the book "Jessie Benton Fremont," written by Pamela Herr, Published by Franklin Watts, New York, N.Y., 1987.

Jessie Fremont in Monterey

Jessie Fremont in Monterey

We have had at last a true speciman of California showers. The wind blew a gale from the south. Cloud on cloud was piled into the zenith, till the whole dome of heaven was filled with substantial darkness. The earth lay in an eclipse. A few heavy rolls of thunder, and the rain fell in torrents; it lasted twelve hours. Every roof and frowning cliff became a cascade. Down each ravine rolled an exulting tide. The aquatic bird dashed onward in its foam to the sea. Suddenly the wind veered into the west, and in a few moments the sky was without a cloud. Field and forest flashed out in the splendors of the sun; and on the soft wind came the gushes of music from the wildwood.¹

So wrote Walter Colton in the fall of 1846.

Three years later the mellow days of gypsy summer were only memories. Now the southwest wind sang through the dark-green shine of the wet pine trees around the bay. The long indrawn sigh and outward exhalation of the surf on the sand was a rhythmic counterpoint.

On days too wet to venture out into the muddy bogs of street or lane in the old Mexican capital of Monterey, Jessie Benton Fremont must have allowed the sewing in her usually busy hands to fall idly into her lap while she listened to the steady tattoo of the rain on the red tile roof of her quarters in the old Castro adobe.²

Just twenty-five years old at this time, Jessie had been secretly married at 16 to the dashing young lieutenant, John Charles Fremont, who was not only penniless, but shadowed by rumors of bastardy. In contrast, Jessie's mother came from a patrician Southern family, and her father was a towering figure of national prominence, Senator Thomas Hart Benton from Missouri. Jessie's early years had been spent in St. Louis and Washington, D.C., and on holidays to visit her mother's family in Cherry Grove, Virginia. She and her father had been nearly inseparable, and her elopment was a bitter blow to him. After reconciliation, she spent much of her time in her father's home as Fremont was on assignment in the West for five out of the first eight years of their marriage.

Despite the controversy surrounding him in California's early history, Jessie never doubted her husband's greatness. During the dramatic events of his life, she remained faithful to her golden vision of him; Fremont, the dynamic explorer who already had led three expeditions across the country, was a leader of the Bear Flag Revolt of 1846, only to be caught in the crossfire of conflicting commands between the Navy's Commodore Stockton and the Army's General Kearney. As a result of his failure to obey orders, he had suffered the stigma of courtmartial, a bitter blow to the ambitious young Army officer.

But now Fremont had a chance to redeem himself. In 1848 a fourth expedition was mounted to map a central route for a railway to the west coast with an eastern terminus in St. Louis, Missouri. The timing of the expedition was planned to test the severity of the winter snows to see if a railway line would be practical throughout the year. Most of the money backing this expedition was supplied by Jessie's father, Senator Benton, and some of his St. Louis friends.

Writing years after these events, Jessie's account of 1849, "A Year of American Travel," is remarkable for its graceful style and keen attention to detail.

Jessie's opening chapter describing her parting from her husband is suitably romantic. The young couple planned to meet in California after John's trip west. Jessie, with six-year old Elizabeth, familiarly called Lily, would sail from New York, cross the Isthmus of Panama, then sail north to San Francisco and a joyful reunion with her "pathfinder" husband. Events were not to prove that simple.

Jessie had gone to Westport Landing (now Kansas City) to say farewell to her husband in October, 1848. After their last 'good-bye,' she returned to a friend's house to spend the night before a trip down river the next day. She was still grieving the death of her infant son, Benton, a short time before.

A she-wolf had been preying on the sheep, and Jessie's host, Major Cummings, and his men had followed the beast to her den and killed her cubs. Jessie wrote:

I was sorry for the wolf, coming back to her ruined place and her dead cubs.⁴

....I was awaked by a sound full of pain and grief, and wild rage too -- a sound familiar enough to frontier people, but new to me. It was the shewolf hunting her cubs; there followed with it, as a chorus, the cry of the pack of hound puppies -- they were young, and frightened. As for me, with nerves already overstrained, a regular panic came on. I knew hunters built fires to scare off wild things; but after [Aunt] Kitty had made a great blaze, a new fear came. The windows were near the ground, and without shutters or curtains. What if the blaze only served to guide the wolf! More than once I had seen dogs go through a pane of window glass as safely as circus riders through their paper hoops; so shawls were quickly hairpinned over the windows, and by that time men's voices and the angry sounds from older dogs gave a sense of being protected, and sleep came again⁵...(it) was broken again by a big dark object, rough-coated, and close to me. It was a speaking wolf too, but not exactly like Red Riding-hood's although it was hungry.

To her delight, Fremont returned so they could have one last night together.

Camp had only been moved about ten miles and a fast ride through and back before sunrise would give us another hour together, and so with our early tea for the stirrup cup, "he gave his bridle rein a shake," and we went our ways, one into the midwinter snows of untracked mountains, the other to the long sea voyage through the tropics, and into equally foreign places.

Jessie's father, Senator Benton, had hoped to accompany her to California, but the press of Senate business kept him in Washington, D.C., and a brother-in-law, Governor Jacobs of Kentucky, decided to become her escort. They sailed from New York in March, 1849.

The parting in New York from her beloved father was painful. Ahead lay all the dark mysteries of hazardous sea and land voyages. Her faithful servant, Harriot, panicked at the last moment and refused to go. Another woman was found, but the first night at sea, Jessie caught her rummaging through the contents of her trunks and instantly dismissed her.

After a smooth passage they landed at Chagres in Panama, and the kindhearted captain begged Jessie to reconsider her plans and sail back to New York with him. She refused, and soon found herself, her daughter, and brother-in-law being poled along the thirty miles of the turbulent Chagres

River. She thought the lush jungle growth and brilliant flowers beautiful despite the shimmering tropical heat.

Just before the party reached Gargona and the last leg of their journey on muleback, Jessie's brother-in-law fell ill with a violent sunstroke which would soon necessitate his return to New York. Again Jessie was prevailed upon to return. Again she refused.

Invited to a breakfast by the alcalde of the village, Jessie writes:

...I had a caution given me just in time to prevent my showing my horror at the chief dish, a baked monkey, which looked like a little child that has been burned to death. The iguana, or large lizard, of which I had seen so many along the river, was also a chief dish. This is held to be very delicate, and its eggs are esteemed as much as certain eggs are among us. The alcalde's house was a thatched roof on poles, with wattled sides, like a magnified vegetable crate.⁶

She soon found herself and Lily, with hundreds of other people, stranded in Panama City without passage to California. Since the Gold Rush now lured all able-bodied men, including the sailors, to the gold fields, she would have to wait patiently for the arrival of a ship to take her on the last leg of the journey.

At one point she suffered a violent attack of what she called "brain fever." While Jessie was suffering from the tropical heat, John Charles Fremont had nearly died in the snows of the bitter winter of 1848-49. A third of his men had frozen to death, and he had barely escaped with his life. Recovering from a badly frost-bitten leg at Kit Carson's home in Taos, New Mexico, he had written Jessie a long letter describing his tragic adventure.

One night during her convalescence there was the booming sound of guns. Not one, but two vessels, the "Panama" and the "Oregon," were in port, ready to carry passengers to California.

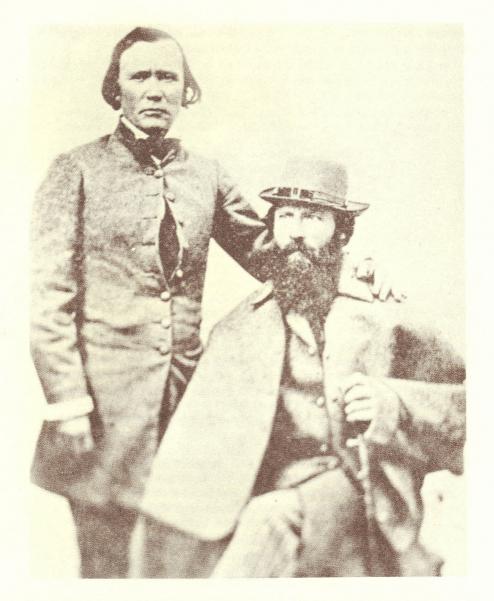
Still not completely recovered from her illness, Jessie and Lily left Panama, praying that John would keep his word to meet them in San Francisco. In San Diego, where the ship briefly dropped anchor, the word came. John Fremont had left "the Angels" [Los Angeles] and was on his way to San Francisco.

When Jessie and Lily reached the city by the Golden Gate in June, 1849,⁹ it was ten days before the long awaited reunion took place. They had rejected the kind offer of Thomas ap Catesby Jones¹⁰ inviting them on board his command, the "Ohio." Instead, the home of the Russian consul, who had recently died, became Jessie's first shelter in California.

June's damp grey fog in San Francisco did not agree with Jessie's sensitive lungs, so the Fremonts decided to move to the little town of Monterey. They settled happily into two large rooms of the Castro adobe which was located on a gentle rise of ground above Lake El Estero. Madame Castro evidently felt no animosity toward the Fremonts despite the fact that her husband, General Jose Castro, defeated by the American forces in Southern California, was in exile in Mexico.

Lily Fremont remembered those days this way:

When my father had to go up into the mountains, we made our home in Monterey, in a large section of a house owned by the Castro family. It was a fine old adobe built in the usual fashion around three sides of a court, which made a fine play-ground for Modesta Castro and myself. Here we two built a quaint baby house out of a big rock, so soft that with kitchen



Kit Carson and John Charles Fremont from a daguerreotype taken in Taos, New Mexico, just before Fremont joined Jessie in San Francisco. Courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Western History Department.

knives, we dug rooms for the small dolls, the little Spaniard learning English, and I Spanish while at play.¹¹

Lily's reference to her father's journey to the mountains underlined again the fact that Fremont was seldom at home. He had given former American Consul Thomas O. Larkin \$3000 to buy farming land near Santa Cruz, but instead the land purchased was in the foothills of the Sierra near Mariposa. Incensed at first, Fremont's anger turned to joy when gold was discovered on his

property. Before long, sacks of gold dust and nuggets were coming into Monterey and hidden in trunks in the Castro adobe.

The Gold Rush had turned life topsy-turvy. For women like Jessie, who were used to the niceties of life, including the help of servants, daily living was a constant challenge.

Domestic matters were even more upset than in San Francisco, where Chinese could be had. Here it was like after a shipwreck on a desert shore; the strongest and most capable was king, and to produce anything like comfort, all capacities had to be put to use. The major general in command of the post, General Riley, was his own gardener. He came to me, proud and triumphant, with a small market basket on his arm, containing vegetables of his own raising. And as we would bring roses of our cultivation, so he brought me a present of a cabbage, some carrots, and parsley.¹²

There were no cows, consequently no milk. Housekeeping, deprived of milk, eggs, vegetables, and fresh meat, becomes a puzzle; canned meat, macaroni, rice, and ham become unendurable from repetition.¹²

Mrs. Canby, wife of one of the officers stationed in Monterey, was fortunate in having a mulatto, who was an excellent baker. She was generous, too, for Jessie remembered the daily "fragrant loaf of fresh bread, wrapped in its clean napkin and on a beautiful china plate."¹⁴

Monterey far outpaced San Francisco in the number and quality of its homes.

Monterey was quite a town, with many good houses, Their adobe walls looked like rough stone, while the red-tiled roofs gave color and picturesqueness--the finer houses built with a disregard of space, a long front to the street, and short wings running back at either end, while the remainder of the square was a large garden, shut in by high adobe walls with a coping of red tiles.¹⁵

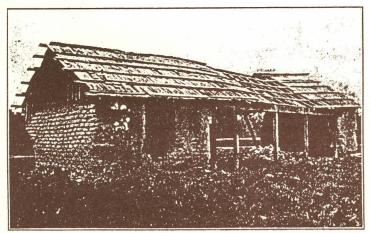
Several weeks after their arrival, Jessie turned their lodging into a charming and eclectic jumble of Chinese and French furnishings. Besides an "exquisite circular table of carved and inlaid work," there were pieces of Chinese bamboo, and rich folds of French and Chinese damask for elegant curtains and coverings. Punch bowls turned into wash basins and shaggy bear rugs covered the tile floor.

Jessie's comments on the women she met are noteworthy:

Among the California ladies were some married to Americans, and they came at once to see me; others, who were thoroughly Californian, and to whom my name represented only invasion and defeat, did not come at first, but after a little were among the kindest people I knew there. The only cow in town belonged to one of these, and she sent me daily a portion of the milk, because I too had a little child. They had very much the life of our Southern people; their household, their children, their domestic surroundings, filled their days busily and contentedly. Their houses were charmingly neat and orderly, and when I made a visit, I generally found the lady of the house sitting in the inner court, shaded by the projecting roof, and surrounded by domesticated Indian girls at their sewing. The same court is said to the sewing.

She also described the passion the California women had for fine apparel. Chinese trunks painted in brilliant colors were packed full of fancy clothes.

As we show a photographic album, they would open those huge trunks and show the satin dresses. The Fourth of July made the occasion for a grand ball; there were some Californians in town, and there was a man-of-war, and the post furnished some dancing men, among them a long thin young Captain, since General, Sherman.¹⁸



Ruins of Governor Castro's first house in Monterey before restoration.

An American woman asked Jessie to let her see her ball-gowns, and when Jessie replied that she had none with her, finally convincing her visitor of the truth, the woman replied, "Why, you was 'pore' when you left the States! Why, I have thirty-seven satin dresses, and no two of them off the same piece."

Later, during the rainy season, Jessie decided to augment her meager wardrobe.

That I had never made a dress did not trouble me; I had done so many things that I had never done before that a new sense of power had come to me, and I had no hesitation in undertaking that. But the only stuffs to be had were Chinese satins and the harshest English merinoes. I got these in the darkest colors that could be found, and ripping up a faithful old black silk, made a facsimile of it in the new stuffs. We knew an old lady at home who never shaped the stockings she knit, but knit straight in one size to the heel, saying it was a badly shaped leg that could not shape a stocking; I think my dresses were somewhat on this plan. But I was in the happy age when figure graced the dress, and queer as they must have been, they looked very well when once on. And I gained another warm gown by cutting off the extra length of my riding habit.²⁰

The servant problem was also settled with the arrival of an Australian woman with a baby in her arms. Mrs. M'Evoy²¹ was neat and clean, and a woman of some education. Not only was she a faithful servant to Jessie but a companion as well, and her baby provided a "live doll" for young Lily.²²

During the late days of summer and early fall, the Fremonts made several trips back and forth between Monterey and San Francisco. With Juan and Gregorio, two Indian outriders in colorful Spanish costumes, the little party visited many of the ranchos between the two settlements.²³

Jessie and Lily were ensconced in a handsome carriage built in New Jersey and shipped to the West. Because of its sliding bottom and double cushions, it made an excellent bed for mother and child. This impressive conveyance was drawn, not by a pair of sleek horses, but by two mismatched mules:

....the larger was white, slow, and a very patient creature; we named him Job; while his companion, which was small enough to deserve the name of

Picayune, was a brisk little animal that made up in work and nerve force for lack of size.²⁴

Jessie mentions stopping at one beautiful rancho owned by some of the Castro family. This Madame Castro was the mother of twenty-six children, most of them sons, and many of them and their families made up a welcoming party for the Fremonts.

She also attended a wedding which lasted for three days, enlivened with feats of riding as well as music and song to cheer on the newlyweds.²⁵ And it was in San Jose where she found Indian laundresses willing to take their travelstained clothing to wash them clean on the rocks in a nearby brook.

Everything looked very white and smelled fresh, but they had been merely washed and dried; there was no starching, no ironing, and a very distorted-looking lot of garments they were.²⁶

In fact, it was also in San Jose where the Fremonts first knew that they, too, were to share in the largess of the Golden State. Buckskin bags, each containing about 100 pounds of gold, were delivered to them there, placed under a straw mattress for safe-keeping and eventually forwarded to Monterey where they accumulated at a truly startling rate.

Jessie wrote lyrically of their vagabond life:

We were in the most delightful season of the year; no rains, no heavy dews; the wild oats were ripe, and gave the soft look of ripe wheat fields to all the hillsides; the wild cattle were feeding about or resting under the evergreen oaks, which looked so like orchard trees that one was disappointed not to find the apples on the ground beneath them; the sky was a deep blue, without a cloud. We were young and full of health, and in all the exhileration of sudden wealth which could enable us to realize our greatest wishes.²⁷

Fremont, and a former guide of his, "Old Knight," would ride ahead looking for the best routes to travel through the countryside. Jessie would be given an early morning cup of tea, and the protection of several blankets while she bathed in some wayside stream. French soap, cologne, and plenty of towels were provided. Breakfast would be taken mid-morning on the way, and often would consist of food bought from the neighboring ranchos: lamb, corn, Spanish onions and peppers.

When the travellers stopped at night, the meal would be repeated with the addition of claret, coffee and tea, and sweetmeats for Lily. Wonderful stories were told around a blazing campfire about Indians, wild animals, and "war," while Jessie, as she said, gave "the element of society."

About nine o'clock all would be still; only the sounds of the logs and boughs as they crackled and burned, and the steady munching of the animals over their feed, with occasionally a disturbance from a coyote that would come and try to steal his supper, but a coyote is only a little wolf at best, and though they would stay off at a distance and howl and bark, yet the noise was only laughable, not like that strange howl of the wolf of the prairies: and how changed the circumstances.²⁸

Jessie had not forgotten the grieving she-wolf at the camp in Westport Landing when John had stolen a few hours from his last night's sleep in camp to return to her before starting his nearly fatal journey through the western storms and snows.

In September, 1849, the Constitutional Convention met in Monterey, and Jessie was back again in her rooms at the Castro house which often became the stormcenter of discussion between the delegates. Since there was no hotel in

the sleepy little town, the men were lodged in private homes, and food was provided through the hospitality of the local women. Jessie served bounteous meals, generally out of doors, with the help of Juan and Gregorio who shot birds and squirrels and broiled them over the coals.

We had every good thing in fruits, vegetables, and sweets that France puts up for transportation, and all served on beautiful Chinese and French china and glass (I had to get used to Juan and Gregorio breaking a great deal of this.)²⁹

One of the burning issues of the convention was the decision whether the state was to go into the Union, slave or free. (Its ultimate stand against slavery was to become the cornerstone of the Compromise of 1850 which saw California go into the nation as a free state in return for concessions to the pro-slavery proponents.)

Jessie felt she had been the catalyst for the anti-slavery forces. Her beloved father had been strongly opposed and would later go down to defeat in the Senate because of his stand.

Jessie had been offered a slave when she first came to Monterey, but despite the scarcity of servants, she had refused on principle. She felt strongly that those men who came to her table as guests during the Constitutional Convention, not only saw how well she managed without much help, but were equally impressed by her vocal anti-slavery views.

The fact that most miners would not work beside slave labor in the gold fields is alleged by many to be one of the true reasons behind California's position on "free labor." Jessie, on the other hand, was a part of the "aristocracy of emancipation," as she put it.

The first legislature met in San Jose in December while Jessie remained in Monterey, "completely housebound" by unusually heavy rains. She had a few books, her sewing, and Mrs. M'Evoy for company.

One evening of tremendous rain, when we were, as usual, around the fire, Mrs. M'Evoy, with her table and lights, sewing at one side, myself by the other, explaining pictures from the "Illustrated Times" to my little girl, while the baby rolled about on the bear skin in front of the fire, suddenly Mr. Fremont came in upon us, dripping wet, as well he might be, for he had come through from San Jose--seventy miles on horseback through the heavy rain. He was so wet that we could hardly make him cross the pretty room; but "beautiful are the feet of him that beareth glad tidings," and the footmarks were all welcome, for they pointed home. He came to tell me that he had been elected Senator, and that it was necessary we should go to Washington on the next steamer of the first of January.

At daylight the next morning he was off again, having to be back in San Jose. A young sorrel horse, of which Mr. Fremont was very fond, brought him down and carried him back this one hundred and forty miles within thirty-six hours, without fatigue to either.³⁰

There is no mention of Christmas festivities in Jessie's book. Nothing about the lovely Spanish pageants and posadas or the brilliant illuminations described by Walter Colton.³¹ Irving Stone in his fictionalized biography creates a charming Christmas scene with Jessie improvising ornaments for a tree, but, in actuality, Jessie's thoughts were probably focused on their long journey back to Washington, D.C. and reunion with her family. This was celebration enough.

When we heard the steamer's gun [Oregon], New Year's night, the rain was pouring in torrents, and every street crossing was a living brook. Mr. Fremont carried me down, warmly wrapped up, to the wharf, where we got into a little boat and rowed out. I have found that it changes the climate and removes illness to have the ship's head turned the way you wish to go.³²

Ahead were years of fame and glory interspersed with disappointment and defeat. After Fremont's term as senator expired (he had drawn the short term), the family returned to California to superintend mining interests at Mariposa where affairs became increasingly complicated and litigious. There were years abroad, Fremont's unsuccessful campaign as the Republican party's first presidential candidate in 1856, the command of the western forces in the Civil War and ultimate dismissal for his premature emancipation proclamation.

The last years were bitter ones. The wealth of the Mariposa mines was eaten up by poor management and unworthy friends. Other business ventures, including railroads, failed and eventually the family was reduced to genteel poverty. Much of their furniture and collections were sold, and there were no more "pretty little rooms."

And now Jessie set to work. She wrote numerous books and articles about their adventures including the charming "A Year of American Travel" and kept the family solvent. General John Charles Fremont died on a visit east in 1890 after they had moved west again to southern California. Jessie lived on with her spinster daughter, Lily, in a house provided for them by the women of Los Angeles until her death in 1902. During those last dark years, she must often have returned in memory to the charming rooms of the old Castro adobe and the freedom of the summer months camping out under the starlit skies of this fledgling state.

By Virginia Stone

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- 7. Fremont, Jessie Benton, A Year of American Travel, the Book Club of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 1960.
- 8. Herr, Pamela, Jessie Benton Fremont, American Woman of the 19th Century, Frnaklin Watts, New York, N.Y., 1987.
- 9. Stone, Irving, Immortal Wife, The Sun Dial Press, Garden City, New York, N.Y., 1946.

FOOTNOTES

- 1. Colton, Walter, Three Years in California, p. 108.
- 2. The Castro adobe now called La Mirada, has had a fascinating history of its own. Fallen into ruin, it was restored by Gouverneur Morris, descendant of the well-known Revolutionary War statesman, and then greatly enlarged. Purchased by the Work family in the 1930's it has become a showcase of antique English, French, and Dutch furniture as well as the finest of Oriental furnishings. Given to the Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art by Mr. Frank Work, it is open to the public on Saturday afternoons and by appointment. Jessie's rooms in the old part of the adobe are still pointed out by docents, and there is an unconfirmed story that the first post office in Monterey was located there. A lovely rose garden and magnificent plantings of rhododendrons provide a jewel-like setting for the historic old house.
- 3. Many of the older biographies of Fremont refuse to admit this possibility.
- 4. Fremont, Jessie Benton, A Year of American Travel, p.8.
- 5. Ibid., pp. 9-10.
- 6. Ibid., p. 31.
- 7. Ibid., p. 37.
- 8. Ibid., pp. 58-59.
- 9. Legend has it that this was John Charles Fremont's name for the entrance to San Francisco Bay.
- 10. This is the infamous Thomas ap Catesby Jones who captured Monterey in 1842 on mistaken intelligence that the United States was at war with Mexico. There were the appropriate apologies, the United States flag was brought down, and a gay fandango was celebrated by all the "combatants" that night.
- 11. Fremont, Elizabeth, Recollections, p. 27.
- 12. Fremont, Jessie Benton, op. ct., p. 68.
- 13. Ibid., p. 69.
- 14. Ibid., p. 69.
- 15. Ibid., p. 70.
- 16. Walter Colton constantly reemphasizes the warm hospitality shown by the Californians.
- 17. Fremont, Jessie Benton, op. cit., p. 71.
- 18. Ibid., p. 72.
- 19. Ibid., p. 72.
- 20. Ibid., pp. 100-101.
- 21. Lily Fremont writes her name as Mrs. Macavoy.
- 22. Fremont, Elizabeth, op. cit., p. 27.
- 23. Ferol Egan in his biography of Fremont has the family also traveling to the Mariposa mines. This would be most unusual in that time of year, and nowhere is it ever mentioned in Jessie's book.
- 24. Fremont, Jessie Benton, op. cit., p. 78.
- 25. A charming letter reprinted in the California Historical Society Quarterly recounts the details of the Jeffers-Willey wedding in Monterey in October, 1849. Wedding guests included Colonel Fremont. "Mrs. Fremont was unable to come as she had poisoned her feet & not able to walk with either shoe or stocking for several weeks." Lottie Wescott, p. 15.
- 26. Fremont, Jessie Benton, op. cit., p. 91.
- 27. Ibid., p. 82.
- 28. Ibid., p. 85.
- 29. Ibid., p. 94.
- 30. Ibid., p. 103
- 31. Colton, Walter, op. cit., p. 129-30.
- 32. Fremont, Jessie Benton, op., cit., p. 103.

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