

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 17, 1952

A Room Over the Calaboose

Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell is a name well known in the annals of school and school teaching in the state of California for it was she who opened the first school taught by an English speaking teacher in California. The school was located on the Santa Clara Mission grounds in a room 15 feet square. The following year, 1847, she moved with her husband Dr. Isaac C Isbell to Monterey and opened a school "in a room over the calaboose." It is about the life of this early pioneer that we will write today.

Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell was born in Ashtabula County, Ohio on August 8, 1824, one of the family of 15 children born to Mr. and Mrs. Warner Mann. Mrs. Isbell was always proud of the fact that she was of the same stock as Horace Mann, the noted educator. She married Dr. Isbell at the age of 20 years, and settled in Warren County, Illinois. In April of '46 they joined General Fremont's wagon train of 23 wagons which left Mt. Pleasant, Iowa on the seventeenth of April and landed at Sutter's Fort on October 1st, going on to the Santa Clara Mission on the 16th because of fear of the Indians. They had originally expected to join the ill-fated Donner party, but missed connections and later joined with Fremont and came over the "Oregon Trail." The party kept together until Fort Hall was reached. Here four families left to go to Oregon and the rest proceeded to California.

When Dr. and Mrs. Isbell and their party reached Santa Clara the people were suffering. They were poorly housed and camp fever broke out. There were not enough well ones to care for the sick. The children were running wild, so Mrs. Isbell later reported, and they were straying outside the mission walls and getting into danger. Because of all these conditions, a room 15 feet square that had been used as a stable, was cleaned and fitted up for a schoolroom. Some of the tiles were taken from the roof to let light in and let out the smoke from the fire, built on the floor in the middle of the room. Here in this little room, Mrs. Isbell taught the first English school in California, commencing about December 15, 1846.

The above description of the school in Santa Clara was first published in April of 1923 in the Santa Paula

Chronicle, as told by Nellie Bercaw. The story was reprinted on May 31, 1951, in the same publication.

In the Santa Clara school, Mrs. Isbell recalled as she told the story before her death on March 26 1899, at Santa Paula, the seats were boxes and a few crude benches. There was one small table at which the 18 or 20 children took turns in writing with quill pens. She told a niece, Miss Mattie Mann of Concordia, Kansas, when the latter visited her in California at the age of 10 years, that in this first school (Santa Clara) she did not have pencils, paper or slates, so she traced a single letter of the alphabet in the palms of the children's hands with charcoal.

There were no desks. The books were such as had been brought across the plains, five or six McGuffey's readers, which were passed from hand to hand; spellers were more plentiful, two or three arithmetics the same number of geographies, and three slates completed the outfit. Dr. Isbell was sick, and at recesses his wife would go to attend his wants.

This school continued for two months, until in April five of the families moved to Monterey and took their oxen to help built fortifications. Among them were Dr. and Mrs. Isbell.

William Warren Ferrier wrote in "Ninety Years of Education in California—1846-1936," a review of Mrs. Isbell's life and teaching. He give Dr. Isbell the credit for the building of the first hotel in Monterey but does not name it. He writes that "Messrs. Thomas O. Larkin, Milton Little and Talbot H. Green urged Mrs. Isbell to teach a school here. A room was fitted up in the Old Custom House used in the regime (others say the old adobe jail). Three dollars per term was charged those who could pay. Rev. Walter Colton who later laid the foundation for the first school house in California, gave her some assistance, a few books were obtained from whaling vessels and craft in the harbor. Mr. Larkin provided pencils and paper. Mrs. Isbell knew no Spanish and only the boys from the Don Jose Abrego family (Mrs. Abrego was Josepha Estrada, half-sister of Governor Alvarado), knew any English. Twenty-five pupils began the term and 56 finished.

(More tomorrow)