

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Raisins and Beads for Gold

Yesterday we began an interesting story of the teaching in Monterey of Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell in the year 1847 – the first English speaking teacher in the first school, which was probably the forerunner of the public school system in California. The story of this woman from 1847 is probably the history of California during that period as she was considered an old settler of the Golden West when the 49ers arrived.

When Mrs. Isbell arrived in Monterey in March 1847, Thomas Oliver Larkin called on her within half an hour after her arrival, accompanied by a Mr. Green and engaged her to teach school. "A room over the calaboose was fitted up for a school room. It was low with a sloping roof, so the larger pupils sat at the ends and in the middle, while the smaller ones were ranged along the sides," wrote Nellie Bercau in The Santa Paula Chronicle of 1923.

Benches with desks were provided and 56 pupils were in attendance, two-thirds of whom were Mexicans and spoke nothing but Spanish. About half had books, some having been left by a passing ship in the care of the Consul, Thomas O. Larkin, who also furnished writing paper for the school. This was the last teaching Mrs. Isbell ever did.

In the spring Dr. Isbell went out about eight miles above where Stockton now is, on the Calaveras. Here were three leagues of land, one-half of which was to be his, with the use of the remainder, for as long as he chose to use it if he succeeded in making a settlement, all previous attempts having failed on account of the Indians.

In this adventure, we have read, the Murphys of San Jose, and Captain Weber were Dr. Isbell's partners. The Indians were sent for and a treaty was made with them, by which they agreed not to molest the stock, and the whites agreed to furnish them with meat whenever they would make their wants known. This treaty was never broken. Dr. and Mrs. Isbell were settled there in a log cabin with a puncheon floor by the first of October 1847, and were there when gold was discovered.

Dr. Isbell and Capt. Weber went to the mines in April, 1848, and commenced trading. A large part of their

trade was with the Indians to whom they sold raisins and beads, pound for pound in gold.

Mrs. Isbell stayed at the ranch and provided meals for men going to and from the mines. The ranch house was on the road between Stockton and Sutter's Fort, eight miles from the former and 45 miles from the latter. She said, "I made as much as the men did at their store. Meals were \$1, butter \$2 per pound and eggs \$3 a dozen." In May 1850, Dr. Isbell rented the ranch and went East by steamer. He afterward sold the property. At the time of the Civil War they were in Texas, from which he and Mrs. Isbell were compelled to flee to save their lives. They were well known loyal and outspoken Unionists.

They escape to Mexico, crossing that country to Mazatlan and traveled from there to San Francisco by a little schooner, being 40 days on the voyage. After this event Mrs. Isbell's home was always in California. In 1865 or '66, she lived in Ojai Valley for a time, later moving to Santa Paula where the doctor died in 1866.

Dr. Isbell had at one time been a surgeon in General Fremont's army, and a small pension as a soldier in the Mexican War, with the freely and lovingly offered assistance of many warm friends was Mrs. Isbell's means of support during the last years of her life.