

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Western Heroine

Few women who came to California by the Overland Route in the early 1840s kept diaries or otherwise wrote of their experience during those hazardous unmarked crossings, so we were interested in finding one of the most intimate accounts dealing with the immigration by Mrs. Benjamin Kelsey. Mrs. Kelsey, her husband, and baby girl made the trip in 1841 in company with Nicholas "Cheyenne" Dawson the author of "Narrative to California in '41 and '49". John Bidwell, who was destined to be governor of California, and Joseph Belden, who became a prominent resident of San Jose in later years, and others.

A San Francisco daily newspaper published an interview with Mrs. Kelsey in 1893, and the Grizzly Bear Magazine reprinted the story in Feb. 1915. Nancy A. Kelsey at the time of the continent crossing was only 18 years old and was the heroine of the party. She relates that she was born in Barren County, Kentucky in 1823, She married Benjamin A. Kelsey when she was very young about 15 years old, and started overland for California with him in 1841, long before the gold days. "I was the only woman. I had a baby to take care of too," she told the interviewer.

"We left our wagons this side of Salt Lake and finished our journey on horseback and drove our cattle. I carried my baby in front of me on the horse. At one place the Indians surrounded us armed with bows and arrows, but my husband leveled his gun at the chief, and made him order his Indians out of range."

"We crossed the Sierra on the first of August 1841. The day we camped on the summit was my 18th birthday. We had a difficult time to find a way down the mountains. At one time I was left alone for nearly half a day, and as I was afraid of Indians. I sat all the while with my baby in my lap on the back of my horse, which was a fine race animal. It seemed to me while I was there alone that the moaning of the winds through the pines was the loneliest sound I had ever heard."

"We were out of provisions, having killed and eaten all our cattle. I walked barefooted until my feet were blistered and lived on roasted acorns for two days. My husband came very near dying with cramps, and it was suggested to leave him. but I said I would never do that,

and we ate a horse and remained over until the next day when he was able to travel . . . At one place I was so weak I could not stand, and I lay on the ground while Mr. Kelsey went out and killed a deer."

In 1844 the Kelseys returned from Oregon where they had been for a year and settled in Napa Valley. "On our return when we had lost five men, our stock was stampeded by the Indians near Shasta. By this time, I had two children. While the arrows were flying into our camp, I took one babe and rolled it in a blanket and hid it in the brush and returning took my other child and hid it also."

In 1861 this wandering family was in Texas where they were attacked by Comanche Indians. The youngest girl was scalped and lived for several years afterward, partly demented. After this tragedy, the family came back to California, "with but one fight at Cook's Spring, New Mexico." They settled near Fresno and were later in Owens Valley and at Los Angeles, where Benjamin Kelsey died in 1888.

"I have enjoyed riches and suffered the pangs of poverty. I have seen U.S. Grant when he was little known. I have baked bread for General Fremont and talked to Kit Carson. I have run from bear and killed most all other kind of smaller game." said Mrs. Kelsey, whose life was an epitome of the heroics and hardships of pioneer women. When the above was written Mrs. Kelsey was living in a rude cabin high up in the Cuyamaca Mountains of San Diego County. There she died about the year 1895.