

CROSSING THE PLAINS
AND EARLY DAYS IN
CALIFORNIA

MEMORIES OF GIRLHOOD DAYS IN
CALIFORNIA'S GOLDEN AGE

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By MARY E. ACKLEY

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INTRODUCTION

MARY E. ACKLEY, whose adventures when crossing the Plains in 1852, and subsequent experiences during the Pioneer Days in California, are related in the following pages, was born at Winchester, Clark County, Missouri, January 9, 1842.

Her father, Samuel G. Medley, was a prosperous and enterprising farmer of Bardstown, Kentucky, who had migrated to Missouri some years before the birth of the daughter who is now Mrs. Ackley. Prior to leaving the Blue Grass state, the Medleys had the misfortune to lose their eldest son and daughter. But two other daughters, Annie and Margaret, were senior to Mrs. Ackley and were in the party that crossed the Plains with her. There were also two sons, John and Jim, who were respectively three and six years junior to her.

The father and mother and five children as well as four men who resided in the same neighborhood were members of a party of ninety to one hundred men, women and children that started from Winchester in April, 1852.

The lure of the gold discoveries in California was largely responsible for the adventure; but the matter of Mrs. Medley's health was also a material factor. The winters in Clark County were severe. Mrs. Medley suffered from the frost and cold, and the climate of California was reputed to be mild and beneficent. The intention was to go out to the new country, make money, regain health for Mrs. Medley, and then return to the beautiful farm and home on the Walkendaw River.

In June, when the Medleys' party was traveling along the Platte River, in a region ablaze with wild roses, cholera overtook the whole train of emigrants, crossing the Plains in twenty to twenty-five covered wagons, and Mrs. Medley was one of the first to be stricken. They buried her there among the wild roses, and the family never returned to the farm on the Walkendaw.

In June, 1857, at the age of fifteen, Mary Medley was married to Warren Ackley of Sacramento, who died in October, 1871. Mrs. Ackley now resides in San Francisco.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOME THAT WAS LEFT BEHIND—PREPARATIONS FOR THE JOURNEY TO CALIFORNIA.

MY PARENTS were both natives of Kentucky. They were married there and had four children. Father was a farmer and lived near Bardstown, Kentucky. They had the misfortune to lose their eldest daughter and eldest son. Then they emigrated to Missouri and settled on a farm on the Walkendaw River in Clark County, Missouri, where I was born in January, 1842. Our postoffice address was Winchester, Clark County, Missouri.

Father was an enterprising man, and when he settled in Missouri he selected a beautiful site for his residence in a little slope of meadow land just at the edge of a forest of black walnut, hickory, wild plum, hazel bush and slippery elm trees. He cleared out a place near a hill, and the public road passed between the site selected for the house and the meadow, and when fenced, formed a lane to the bridge which spanned the Walkendaw River. Many wild plum, slippery elm and black walnut trees were left standing around the home site. Near the foot of the hill father dug out the clay and burned the brick of which the house was built—the first brick house in our neighborhood. The entire woodwork of the house was of black walnut.

One incident which is vivid in my memory occurred when I was going to school one cold morning in January. I was just six years old. I started for home in the afternoon in a

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big snowstorm, and when going down a steep hill I fell in a snowdrift. My eldest sister helped me out, and at the foot of the hill we stopped at the house of a neighbor, who informed us we had a baby brother, which was a great surprise.

The winters were cold. Icicles hung from the eaves of the houses, and often snow and ice covered the farm. Father was a typical Kentuckian all the days of his life—very hospitable and sociable. We always had guests in our home, and the winters were quite gay with dancing, quilting, apple paring and sleigh-riding parties. I remember two big barns were filled with tobacco hanging up to dry. One barn was full of hay and corn for the stock. A colored woman in the kitchen molded candles, made sausage meat, mincemeat and other good eatables. Negro George was hired by the year to work on the farm and when he was in the kitchen he loved to sing and dance, and always seemed happy. Father did not own slaves in Missouri, but always had them hired by the year from their masters.

The spring was a busy season with ploughing, sowing and planting, and the home was beautiful with blooming orchards. The weather was warm in summer and quickly ripened the grain. The crop was harvested by men with cradles who cut down the grain, and men walked behind them binding it up in sheaves, and when the cradles were sharpened with a whetstone they made a peculiar noise or sound which would be like music to my ears to hear again. A great field of growing tobacco was good to see, but I detested the green worms that infested the plants. I enjoyed the fireflies at night and I loved to hear the whippoorwills

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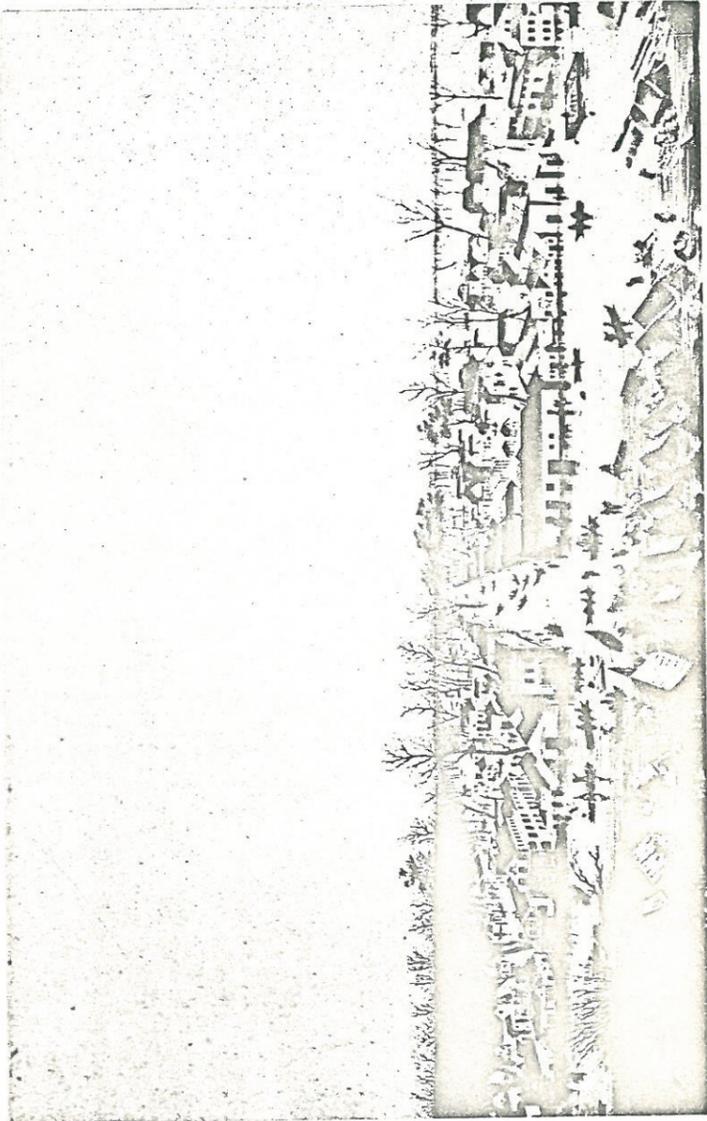
and to gather the beautiful lady slippers which grew wild on the place. The neighborhood always had a barbecue on the Fourth of July, when oxen were roasted whole in the ground, and we had a real feast, and there was dancing, speech-making and a merry time. After the slaves had served their masters at dinner they adjourned under a shady grove, where they danced and sang and enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content.

The autumns were spent in gathering nuts which grew wild and in abundance, and the farmers were busy laying up provisions for the winter.

I must not forget the log school-house in the shaded dell by the running brook where the young children went to school in the summer time and the grown-up children in the winter.

We had frequent thunderstorms in summer. Our dog Sancho never came into the house except when it thundered and flashed lightning. Then he would run into the house, frightened almost to death, crawl under the loom and stay there until the storm was over. We had a well with a long sweep and an old oaken bucket which hung in the well. Our mother wove on a loom wool blankets, jeans and linen tablecloths. She was a religious woman, gentle, refined and devoted to her family. Our parents were both Catholics and we had family prayer every night before retiring, the memory of which is still very vivid and beautiful to me.

In 1848 gold was discovered in California. Early in 1849 there was great excitement in our neighborhood. Several made up their minds to go to California and make their fortunes, father among the rest. A few days before



SACRAMENTO AFTER THE GREAT FLOOD IN JANUARY, 1850

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it was time to start on their journey, mother fell ill and her life was in danger, so father gave up the trip. Two years after, in 1851, several returned and gave glowing accounts of California, the mild climate, gold mines and grizzly bear hunting. Brother John, six years old, stood spellbound as he heard the marvelous stories of bear hunts. Early in 1852 father again took the California fever and decided to start for the Coast. He also decided to take his family with him, as many in the neighborhood intended to go and take their families, and they planned to travel together.

All was excitement getting ready to start across the plains in the spring. The first thing father did was to go to Keokuk and order two strong wagons which were made with long wagon beds and then corded with ropes the length of a mattress. In those days bed springs were not used; all bedsteads were corded. Tall bows were placed over the wagon bed with two covers of heavy canvas made to fasten tight in front and back to keep out rain. A large, tight box was made behind the wagon bed with a lid on hinges to let down, which could be used as a table. In the box we carried cooked food for lunch at noon. It also carried a can of fresh milk. A tent was ordered with poles that could be folded up and tied to the side of the wagon. Clothing was packed in canvas sacks and placed in the bottom of the wagon under the corded bed.

The front of the wagon was tall enough to allow one to stand up straight in it. This was the family wagon. In the other wagon our provisions were stored to last through the journey. The four men who came with us occupied

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that wagon. Our provisions consisted of ham, bacon, flour, corn meal, beans, rice, dried fruit, salt, tea, coffee and vinegar—everything was packed carefully in heavy canvas bags. On the 25th of March the great auction sale took place. All the furniture of the home and the farming utensils were sold to the highest bidder. The farm was not for sale but was rented for three years, as we intended to return. No one in those days expected to make California his permanent home.

On April 22, 1852, we were ready to start on our long journey. We had two yoke of oxen for each wagon. Four men came out with us, each one paying a certain sum of money or something equivalent. Tom Shuman gave a yoke of young oxen and the others money. The other men were Ben Baker, Alex Simon and Doc Clay. I do not know whether he was related to Henry Clay or not, but I hardly believe he was, as he was the laziest man in camp. Besides the four yoke of oxen we had several other oxen, a horse and also a cow which gave us milk all the way across the plains. I was so gay and happy when I bid good-bye to the old home. I found mother crying and said to her: "Why, mother, do you feel so sad?" She replied: "Child, you will wish yourself back many a time." (And I did.)

CHAPTER II.

PERILS AND TRAGEDIES OF THE PLAINS—DEATH OF AUTHOR'S MOTHER.

ON LEAVING the farm we had to cross the bridge over the Walkendaw River. The cow that was raised on the farm would not cross the bridge, so a rope was tied around her horns and a man on horseback swam the river, drawing the cow after him. We were delayed until noon in consequence. We traveled two days and then reached a colony of relatives who lived on farms in Scotland County, Missouri, where we made a short visit. The morning we left they had congregated at grandmother's house and it was a sad gathering. The house was full of people, many in tears. Grandmother was prostrated. I went to her room to bid her good-bye and she said, "Child, I will see you no more," and they all said, "We will never meet again." (Which was true, for we never met again.) We traveled along until we arrived at Council Bluffs. There was such a large emigration ahead of us that father had to register and wait his turn to be ferried over the Missouri River. We camped there three weeks before our time came and were ferried over and camped on the other side, which was a city of tents, now the city of Omaha. When we set foot on the right bank of the Missouri River we were outside the pale of civil law. We were within the Indian country, where no organized civil government existed. In Utah territory we joined our neighbors from Clark County, Missouri, and formed a train of about twenty wagons.

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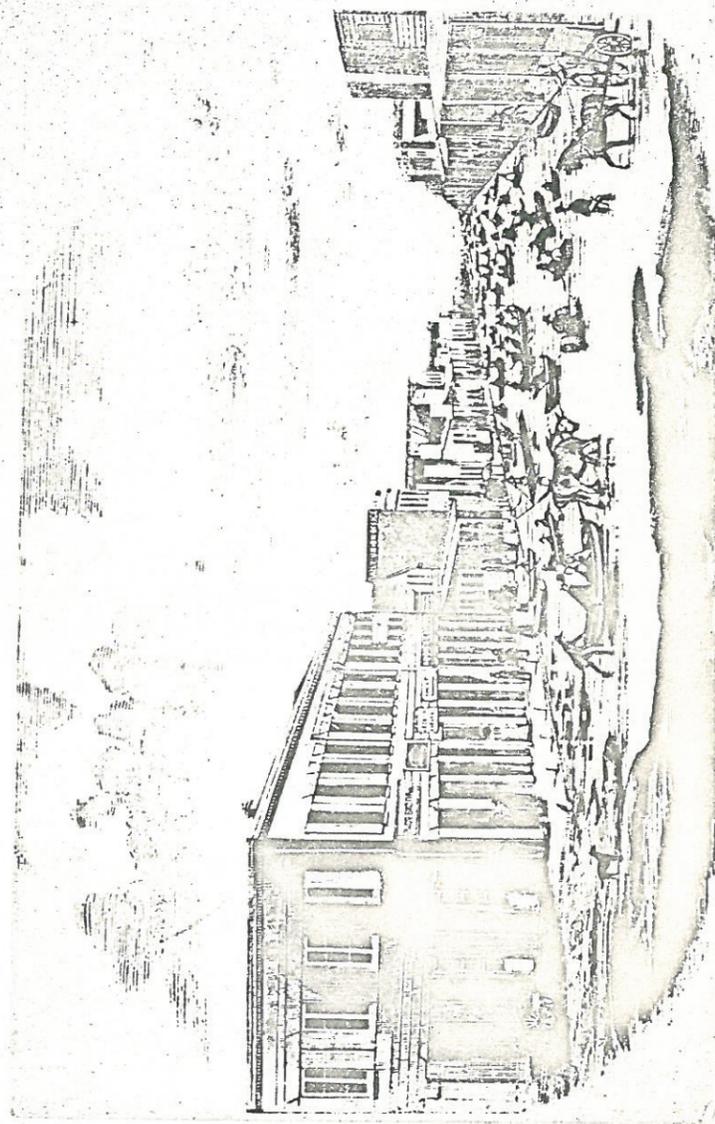
It was necessary to travel together in large trains for protection from the Indians, and to be heavily armed. Every train had a captain who governed and settled all disputes and selected the camping grounds. Our captain was Mr. Handshaw, a great big, handsome man. The first few weeks of our journey were very pleasant. The young people danced in the evening by the moonlight and the little children, too, had merry times. Four men took turns standing guard every night to protect the camp and prevent the stock from being stampeded. We traveled about twelve miles a day, and when we stopped for the night all the wagons were drawn up in a line and the tents were pitched behind them, forming a street. Then preparations began for supper. We had a little sheet iron stove at the beginning of the trip, but it proved to be a nuisance and was discarded. The cook, one of the men of our party, used to dig a trench about a foot deep and three feet long, build a fire in it and then hang the crane over the trench with the coffee pot and camp kettle. As soon as he had coals in the trench he baked bread in a Dutch oven, fried the meat, made coffee and tea, and when supper was ready a coarse cloth was spread on the ground to protect us from dust and the prickly pears. Then the tin dishes were taken from the box behind the wagon and placed around our table on the ground for eleven people. The milk can was brought out with a lump of butter on top, churned by the motion of the wagon.

After supper was over preparations were made for bed. Our tent was pitched behind the family wagon and a ditch dug around it to keep it from being flooded, for we had

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some terrible rainstorms on the Platte River. A heavy canvas was spread on the ground in the tent and two feather beds were placed on it, where part of our family slept, the rest sleeping very comfortably in the corded wagon bed which took the place of a spring mattress. Our family numbered seven. Father and mother, who were young people; sister Annie, seventeen years old; sister Margaret, twelve; I was ten, brother John seven, and brother Jim, the baby, four. The country we traveled over was beautiful. Although emigration was large we found plenty of grass for the stock.

Whatever is in a person will come out on the plains, whether it is good or bad, mean or selfish. Two men in our train were traveling together. They had a span of horses and a light spring wagon. I will designate them by calling them John Doe and Richard Roe. They were afraid their horses would give out before they reached the end of the journey, so they persuaded one of our men to join them with the yoke of oxen he had contributed to pay for his trip across the plains. Just before we were ready to start one morning father espied the yoke of oxen hitched in front of the horses belonging to these men. He went forward to take them and John Doe hit him over the head with a whip, which staggered him. Recovering himself, he again went for his oxen and then Richard Roe went for him. They clinched and commenced to fight. Bystanders promptly separated them. Mother said, "Sammy, don't have any trouble; give them the cattle." Sister Annie said, "Father, fight for your rights." Margaret jumped up and down in a bed of cactus. Father shouted, "The cattle are



J STREET, SACRAMENTO, AFTER THE FLOOD IN 1852

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mine; I will never give them up." Someone called the captain. He came forward and asked the cause of the disturbance, and upon being informed he looked at father and asked him if he had a written agreement with the young man. "I have," father replied. Annie ran to the wagon and brought forth the document, handing it to the captain, who read it aloud, and when he had finished he said, "The cattle are yours, go and take them." That settled the controversy. We soon proceeded on our way as if nothing had happened. Before many weeks had transpired the young man asked to be taken back to our family. His request was granted and he was a peaceable young man the rest of the trip.

On the Platte River we saw herds of buffaloes. The young men in our camp frequently went hunting after supper. The captain had lanterns hung on a high pole so they could find their way back to camp, and we greatly relished fresh meat once more.

While we were traveling along the Platte River in June cholera broke out among the emigrants. Mother was among the first victims. We camped alone on the day she was first taken ill. Our train went on. We heard there was a physician not far behind us, a Dr. Mason, and we waited for his train to overtake us in the middle of the afternoon. He stopped and treated mother, stating the case was very serious, and advised us to join his train the following day, as they intended to camp part of the day. We started the next morning, overtaking his train at noon, and camped on the Platte River, under cottonwood trees, in a beautiful spot where wild roses grew in great profusion. On June

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24 at 2 o'clock in the afternoon mother died. Although I remember every detail of her death and burial I will draw a veil. It is too sad and sacred. I cannot write about it. Seventy-five years have passed since then, but whenever I see a wild rose the whole scene comes vividly before me.

When Dr. Mason asked us to join his train we did not know that our mother had cholera. During the epidemic of cholera we passed a dozen new-made graves a day. Dr. Mason was captain of this train. He had a wife and several children.

We traveled on, and four days after mother's death my two brothers were playing in the wagon on the bed, the curtains were rolled up and the front wheels went down in a rut which jarred the wagon, throwing brother John out. A hind wheel ran over him, breaking one of his legs. Had it not been for deep sand in the road he would have been killed. His leg was set at once by Dr. Mason and he got along well, but was confined to the wagon for the rest of the long journey.

We passed mounds or villages where prairie dogs, owls, snakes and badgers lived, but how they lived I had no way of finding out. We passed Fort Laramie, Pike's Peak, Independence Rock, Chimney Rock, Devil's Gate and many beautiful colored rocks and boiling springs, both hot and cold water.

Some weeks after mother's death, we were traveling through a deep canyon and camped one night under a thick grove of trees. In the morning when the train was ready to start father found that one of his oxen was miss-

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ing. He said he would stop to find it and would soon overtake the train. He mounted his horse, carrying his gun with him, and commenced to search for the missing ox. Noon came and our father had not overtaken us. We traveled on and camped just before sunset. I never felt so miserable in my life. I sat on the ground with my face buried in my hands, speechless. I knew well that if a train did not overtake father the treacherous Indians would kill him. What would become of us children? I heard men talking in low tones, and I gathered from what I heard that the captain intended to send out a posse to search for father as soon as the men had supper. Then I heard cheer after cheer. I looked up and there was big, handsome father riding in front of a pack train of twelve men on mules and with more mules packed with their supplies following behind. The twelve men were our guests at supper, and in the evening after the chores of the camp were finished others joined the group around the campfire. They had breakfast with us in the morning and started for their day's journey before our train was ready. As they were leaving us father grasped each one by the hand and said, "Good-bye, brother."

I did not hear any of their names, much to my regret.

This is father's story. When he found the ox it was high noon and not a person was in sight. A few minutes later he saw Indians on a hill beckoning to other Indians on a hill across the canyon. They soon met and came down the canyon towards him, and he could see they carried guns. He knew his danger and prepared with his trusty gun to fight for his life. The Indians were approaching fast and