

Sallie Fox heads back to Albuquerque

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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My last column recalled the harrowing cross-country travels undertaken by Sallie Fox and her family from Albuquerque to California in 1858.

After a Mojave Indian attack at the Colorado River, during which Sallie's stepfather Alpha Brown and several other men had been killed and Sallie and others had been severely wounded, and wagon train members had lost most of their possessions, the survivors decided to retrace their steps rather than forge on into California.

Their journey back to civilization led through the same rocky terrain, desert-like landscape and hot sand that they had traversed a few weeks earlier. This time, however, they were tired, dejected, with one wagon and one team of oxen between them. Most had to walk, day after endless day. Food was short and the train members became progressively weaker.

What food there was, was first given to the wounded. Years later, Sallie's daughter Edith recalled the story that "one day Grandma (Mary Baldwin Brown) came to Sallie's side and said she had a nice tidbit for her to eat; but Mama, though starving, suspected they had killed her pet goat, Vegas, and said, 'No, I cannot eat Vegas,' and she did not, hungry as she was. One night before that, Grandma had given her a little piece of bacon, but it was so precious that she just kept it in her mouth and went to sleep with it 'like a little mouse owl.' "

At some time, Mrs. Brown's horse gave out from lack of fodder. From there on, she, like others, walked all the way back to Albuquerque. Her husband's untimely death and the worries about Sallie's wounds weighed heavily on her. "To keep from going crazy," as she recalled later, she would knit a stocking while walking, and when she reached the end of her yarn supply, she would unravel everything and begin anew.

The walkers were so exhausted that they would hold onto the wagon wheels when they rested, so as to wake up again when the wheels began to turn.

Weeks later, the party reached Peach Springs and camped in a canyon. Watching the horizon, Sallie saw what she thought were sunbonnets coming down the steep entrance hill. These turned out to be another wagon train on its way to California. Led by Edward O. Smith, train members helped the feeble survivors, sharing their food supply with them.

Sallie always remembered Mr. Smith as the most wonderful and handsome man she ever saw. She decided then and there that, should she ever have a son, she would name him Edward, after Edward Smith - and she did.

After hearing of the difficulties and dangers the Rose/Brown train had encountered, the members of the Smith train decided to turn around and retrace the 500 miles back to Albuquerque.

Mr. Smith and his train members continued to provide food for all the survivors, until the supplies dwindled down to beans, dried beef and hardtack. Sallie's little brother Orrin who had taken to Mr. Smith, would call him to dinner with the words "Smiffy, come to beans."

Eventually, the party decided to send a group of young men ahead to alert the cavalry stationed at Fort Defiance of their plight. They slaughtered one of the last oxen, an animal "that was so poor you might say you had to hold him up to knock him down," and dried its meat. The group set out with some of the last precious food supplies, flour and the salted beef jerky. They did not take much water, as they expected to reach a canyon by darkness, where water had been plentiful in spring, on their way west.

It was now well into autumn, and when the men reached the canyon, they found the water source dried up. The next water source was a long way away. A forced march was begun that lasted a night, a day, and the next night. The salted beef increased their thirst. Eventually, they reached a water hole, with tongues swollen and staggering like drunken men. The water they found was foul-smelling and full of "a kind of white worm an inch or so long." They filtered the water through their handkerchiefs. One of the men remembered that "It seemed to me the best water I ever tasted."

They finally reached Fort Defiance. Cavalry went out with supplies. The whole camp sobbed with relief when the soldiers appeared to escort them through Navajo territory back to Albuquerque.

The terrible deprivations took their toll on Sallie's family once more. Her little brother, 2-year-old Orrin, had been sickly for some time. He died shortly after the train had crossed the Rio Grande and was buried in Albuquerque.

When the survivors reached the town, their story had preceded them. Storekeepers fitted them out. Mexican women tried to help nurse Sallie. Mr. Brown had been a Freemason, and the lodge in Albuquerque supported his widow and the children through the winter.

The next spring, the family set out again with Mr. Smith and his party for California.

This time, their journey proceeded uneventfully. While camping on the Gila River, Sallie picked up a few black walnuts, which she took all the way to California. She planted them with a little ceremony on her uncle Josiah Allison's ranch in Vacaville, and one of these grew to become the famous Nut Tree.

When Mrs. Brown and the children finally arrived in Vacaville, Josiah Allison wanted to pay Mr. Smith \$200 for bringing the family out. But Mr. Smith refused, saying: "Oh no! I never intended to take any pay. I only made that arrangement that Mrs. Brown might be easy in her mind on the way."

Sallie's story is based on her own recollections, and on the stories she told to her daughter Edith Milner and her son Edward O. Allen, and on "The Story on an Emigrant Train" by Joseph Warren Cheney. Sallie's apron with the two arrow holes in it is on display in the Vacaville Museum's new exhibit "Common Threads." The exhibit opened to the public Saturday. It will run through Jan. 5, 2003. The museum is open Wednesday through Saturday from 1 to 4:30 p.m.

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