

Woman used creativity to survive camps

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, February 05, 2006

On Dec. 15 and 22, 1855, the Solano County Herald reprinted the last of the so-called "Shirley Letters." Louise Amelia Clappe chronicled her experiences at Rich Bar on the Feather River during 1852. This last letter was written in late November 1852, addressed to her sister, Molly.

The letters were first published in the newspaper The Pioneer in 1854, and quickly reprinted around California. Louisa Clappe's astute observations and lively descriptions of the hardships of live in a gold-mining camp likely resonated with early settlers. Many of them had experienced similar deprivations, solved obstacles with grit and determination and tried to keep their sanity in the face of defeat.

Louisa and her husband, Fayette Clappe, were part of an investment group trying to mine Rich Bar. After a year of hard work and much money spent, their gold-mining venture proved to be a total loss.

The November 1852 letter is the last in a series of 23 letters, chronicling the final days at Rich Bar. The miners were anxiously waiting to see whether the group would be able to leave before the impending winter. Everybody seemed to be depressed, waiting for the mule trains to arrive and pick them up.

"I wish that you could see me about these times," wrote Louisa. "I am generally found seated on a sugar-box in the chimney corner, my chin on my hand, rocking backwards and forwards (weaving, you used to call it) in a despairing way, and now and then casting a picturesly (sic) hopeless glance about our dilapidated cabin. Such a looking place as it is! Not having been repaired, the rain pouring down the outside of the chimney - which is inside of the house - has liquefied the mud, which now lies in spots all over the splendid tin mantle piece, and festoons itself in graceful arabesques along the side thereof. The lining overhead is dreadfully stained, the rose-garlanded hangings are faded and torn, the sofa-covering displays picturesque glimpses of hay, and the poor, worn-out carpet is not enough to make India-rubbers desirable."

Daily life posed challenge after challenge, teaching everybody how to make do with very little. Louisa actually seems to have been financially better off than some of the other women. Where Luzena Stanley Wilson had to cook, scrub, and employ her many skills to keep her family financially afloat, Louisa was able to hire a cook and lived in a furnished cabin with carpets and other niceties. Nonetheless, like Luzena, she needed

to use every ounce of her creativity and stubbornness to survive.

“To my extreme vexation, Ned, that jewel of cooks and fiddlers, departed at the first approach of rain, since when I have been obliged to take up the former delightful employment myself. Really, everybody ought to go to the mines, just to see how little it takes to make people comfortable in the world. My ordinary utensils consist of - item, one iron dipper, which holds exactly three pints; item, one brass kettle of the same size; item, the gridiron, made out of an old shovel, which I described in a former letter. With these three assistants, I perform absolute wonders in the culinary way. Unfortunately, I am generally compelled to get three breakfasts; for sometimes the front stick will break and then down comes the brass kettle of potatoes and the dipper of coffee, extinguishing the fire, spilling the breakfast, wetting the carpet, scalding the dog, waking up P. from an eleven-o'clock-in-the-day dream, and compelling poor me to get up a second edition of my morning's work, on safer and more scientific principles.”

Home-cooked meals, concocted with whatever scant supplies there were, brought everybody to the table. For many men, having a woman cook and create the semblance of a civilized atmosphere brought back memories of their own families.

“At dinner time some good-natured friend carves the beef at a stove outside, on condition that he may have a plate, knife and fork at our table. So when that meal is ready, I spread on the said table - which at other times does duty as a China closet - a quarter of a sheet, which, with its three companion quarters, was sanctioned and set apart, when I first arrived here, for that sacred purpose. As our guests generally amount to six or eight, we dispense the three tea spoons at the rate of one to every two or three persons. All sorts of outlandish dishes serve as tea-cups; among others, wineglasses and tumblers - there are always plenty of these in the mines - figure largely. Last night, our company being larger than usual, one of our friends was compelled to take his tea out of a soup plate. The same individual, not being able to find a seat, went outside and brought in an empty gin-cask, upon which he sat, sipping iron table spoons full of his tea, in great apparent glory and contentment.”

Her description of the settlement is very bleak. Luzena Stanley Wilson, who lived through the Gold Rush years in Sacramento and in Nevada, before settling in Vacaville, recalled similar scenes in her memoirs.

“Sometimes I lounge forlornly to the window, and try to take a birds-eye view of ‘outdoors,’ ” wrote Louisa. “First, now a large pile of gravel prevents me from seeing anything else; but, by dint of standing on tip-toe, I catch sight of a hundred other large piles of gravel - Pelion upon Ossa-like heaps of gigantic stones - excavations of fearful deepness - innumerable tents, calico hovels, shingle palaces, ramaras (pretty, arbor-like palaces, composed of green boughs, and Baptized with that sweet name),

half a dozen blue and red-shirted miners, and one hatless hombre, in garments of the airiest description, reclining gracefully at the entrance of the Humboldt, in that transcendental state of intoxication, when a man is compelled to hold on to the earth for fear of falling off. The whole Bar is thickly peppered with empty bottles, oyster cans, sardine boxes, and brandied fruit-jars, the harsher outlines of which are softened off by the thinnest possible coating of radiant snow. The river, freed from its wooden flume prison, rolls gradually by."

While Louisa wrote scathingly about the settlement and the damage settlers and gold-mining had done to the landscape, she also clearly had fallen in love with California and its grandiose nature. Many portions of her letters dwell on the unspoiled landscape that surrounded her.

"The green and purple beauty of these majestic, old mountains looks lovelier than ever, through its pearl-like network of foaming streamlets, while, like and immense concave of pure sapphire, without spot or speck, the wonderful and never-enough-to-be-talked-about sky of California drops down upon the whole its fathomless splendor."

But life in a gold mining camp also offered moments of excitement, especially when somebody found a sizeable amount of gold. Most often, this was just a nugget or small amount of gold. This November letter, though, reports a strange find indeed.

"I have just been called from my letter to look at a wonderfully curious gold specimen. I will try to describe it to you, and to convince you that I no not exaggerate its rare beauty. I must inform you that two friends of ours have each offered a hundred dollars for it; and a blacksmith in the place, a man utterly unimaginative, who would not throw away a re cent on a mere fancy, has tried to purchase it for fifty dollars.

"It is of unmixed gold weighing about two dollars and a half. Your first idea in looking at it is of an exquisite little basket. There is a graceful cover, with its rounded nub at the top, the three finely carved sides - it is tri-formed - the little stand upon which it sets, and the tiny clasp which fastens it. In detail, it is still more beautiful.

"On one side you see a perfect W, each finely shaped bar of which is fashioned with the nicest exactness. The second surface presents to view a Grecian profile, whose delicately cut features remind you of the serene beauty of an antique gem. It is surprising how much expression this face contains, which is enriched by an oval setting of delicate beading. A plain, triangular space of burnished gold, surrounded by bead work, similar to that which outlines the profile, seems left on purpose for a name.

"The owner, who is a Frenchman, decidedly refused to sell this gem, and you will

probably never have an opportunity to see, that the same Being who has commanded the violet to be beautiful can fashion the gold - crucibled (sic) into metallic purity within the earth's dark heart - into shapes as lovely and curious."

I will continue the story of Louise Clappe in my next column.

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