

Recounting women's roles in early California

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Women played an important role in early Californian history. In 1900, California celebrated its first 50 years of statehood. The San Francisco Chronicle interviewed several prominent pioneer women and published their oral histories in an article on Sept. 9, 1900.

The article quoted the experiences of Mrs. F. A. Van Winkle, who was previously married to Benicia founder, Dr. Robert Semple, and the experiences of her sister, Susan Cooper Wolfskill, widow of John Wolfskill of Winters.

The Chronicle stated in its opening paragraph the article's intent to honor these pioneer women.

"Many and many a time it has been noted that there is nowhere in all this country, a monument to the foremothers of the land. It is a trite saying that the Puritan foremothers are deserving of honor, since they not only had to endure the hardships and privations of a new country, but were obligated to endure the forefathers, too."

"And so it comes that the pioneer woman of California-the dear foremothers-have never been properly honored. Time and again the gray-haired, blithe-hearted Pioneers have ridden in carriages, but the women, always by their sides in the primitive cabins, or crossing the plains with their little children tugging at their skirts and a baby at the breast, were in the background."

"In deadly dread of Indians, more for the tender little lives about them than for their own, for the thought of laying down their own burdens must have been rather a pleasant one, they cowered in the covered wagons that crawled across the plains or prayed to heaven in the fearful storms about Cape Horn, or in the fever-laden heat of the isthmus."

"But women came to the Golden State prior to 1850, yes, three years before the forty-niners arrived. Some of those earliest pioneer mothers are still living. It is with their interesting experiences that this article deals. Read the personal reminiscences of several of them and you get facts and scenes that seem hardly credible, so marvelously have all things changed since California was an obscure Mexican territory."

Mrs. Van Winkle, the former Miss Frances Anne Cooper of Howard County, Mo.,

recounted the story of her family's decision to move on to California.

"Both father and mother were born in Kentucky, but like a good many other Kentuckians of those days, they moved out to Missouri, where we children were born. Then father was appointed Indian Agent at Council Bluffs, Iowa, old Colonel Thomas Benton getting him the position. There was no town there then-just the agency buildings. The only white people besides us were the blacksmith and another family. We children grew up there with the Indians as our playmates."

Early on, information about California filtered back to the East, promising paradise to those who dared the long voyage.

"One day I read a pamphlet written by a man who had been in California. His name was Hastings, and he was a cousin to Judge Hastings."

"His description of the beautiful flowers blooming in winter, of the great herds of Spanish cattle in lovely fields, of glorious scenery, and of the ideal climate and blue skies, made me just crazy to move out there, for I thought such a country must be a paradise. Mother thought so too, but father told us it was a dangerous trip and that Indians might kill all of us on the way. He had been a good ways west, hunting buffalo, and he knew something of the great stretches of plains. But we kept talking about California until father decided to put it to a family vote whether we should go or stay."

"Father went out with Fremont in 1845 to explore the Far Western country. The parties separated and returned. Father came home in time to lead our party, although we had already decided to go anyway."

"So, in May, 1846, we started, I being then 20 years of age."

I will continue this story in my next column.

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