

California's pioneer women first recognized in 1900

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This is the final installation in my series based on the recollections of pioneer women who arrived in California in the late 1840s. The San Francisco Chronicle gathered their histories and published them on Sept. 9, 1900, in commemoration of California's 50th anniversary.

This article was preceded on Aug. 12 by a notice in the San Francisco Examiner, asking, "Why no provision had been made for the pioneer mothers in the celebration of California's Golden Jubilee?"

A few days later, three ladies called on Mrs. Noble Martin of Berkeley, widow of former Sen. Martin, with a proposal to found a woman's pioneer society.

Mrs. Martin then inserted a notice in Examiner, calling a meeting for Aug. 28. This time, six ladies responded and The Association of Pioneer Women of California was born, the first pioneer women's society in California.

Mrs. Martin, whose first name is never mentioned in the sources, was the former Miss Weare of Independence.

A pioneer woman herself, she arrived at Sutter's Fort with her family on Nov. 20, 1849. She was 15.

Although she does not specifically mention it, the Weare family was drawn here by the discovery of gold the previous year.

"We were just six months to the day crossing the plains," recalled Mrs. Martin. "Our destination was Sutter's Fort, . Mike McClelland, who was also from Independence, kept the hotel at Sutter's Fort and was a family connection of ours."

Their train took the old Santa Fe trail. Despite passing through Indian territories, they had an uneventful trip.

"As I remember it, our long journey was a continuous pleasure trip," she said. "When we arrived at Sutter's Fort the whole inclosure [sic] was a human beehive, just swarming with people, and there were people in the little rooms all about the court, and soldiers, perhaps twenty of them."

November and December 1849 proved unusually wet, with up to 36 inches of rain falling. Mrs. Martin's mentioned her experiences in flooded Sacramento in passing, before the family went on to the gold fields.

"After a few days' entertainment the women of our party moved over to Sacramento. I remember going down J Street in a flat-bottom boat. We all camped out. I suppose there were 200 or 300 women in Sacramento at that time."

Vacaville founding mother Luzena Stanley Wilson also was in Sacramento at that time, but only remembered one or two women.

"From Sacramento we went up the river by boat to Marysville, and later to Bidwell's Bar, and to each of the other new mining camps as they were formed.

"I sluiced many and many a day. One member of our party picked up a \$400 nugget on the Honecut."

Mrs. Martin's experiences parallel those of Wilson. Both women quickly realized that providing services could be as profitable as searching for gold.

"There were no bakeshops in those early days, and I made many an apple pie, just of common dried apples, and sold them for a dollar apiece. The women helped in that way to support the families, for mining was not always a certain means of livelihood."

The San Francisco Chronicle also mentioned other pioneer women but did not provide much information. Of local interest is "Mrs. Mary J. Martin Hall of Fairfield, Solano county. Mrs. Hall is a pioneer of 1849, having left Missouri on May 1st of that year. It is wonderful how many pioneers Missouri furnished. They had pushed west twice before, and the fever still strong in their blood, came west across the desert and the mighty mountains to make their homes beside the Pacific waters.

"It was November 4, 1849, when Mrs. Hall landed in the mining town of Ophir on the Feather river. She lived there until the fall of 1850, and, as a little girl, panned out \$75 in gold. For fifty years she has lived in Solano county "

The Chronicle concluded by honoring these pioneer women with the closing remarks: "Most of these women are widows, but their step is firm and elastic, their hair white but abundant, and their memories clear and untarnished. Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, was not more honored than they shall be, for these are the matrons of the commonwealth."

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