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## Clarissa Burrell

Joan B. Barriga

*The late Joan Barriga wrote many stories for MNN. She was Marlene's good friend, and a fellow historian. This story is from Joan's series, Women of the Santa Cruz Mountains.*

"We have very little temptation to use meat for we seldom have it before us. The children talk some of abstaining from all fleshly lusts, but they think it would be rather hard to refuse chicken or squirrel if it was set before them." So wrote Clarissa Burrell to her husband Lyman, who had gone off to the California goldfields, leaving her to care for their four children, fight off the creditors, and run the family business, a candle factory. There was no meat for the table that Christmas Day, because Clarissa had just sent 1800 pounds of butchered pork to market, where it sold for five cents a pound. She used the money to pay the mortgage.

During the two years that he had been away from his family, Lyman had managed to accumulate \$2,000, in spite of what seemed to be an alarming propensity for bad luck. He had arrived in the Mother Lode country by way of the Lassen Trail, an unusually difficult route. Along the way, he shot off a finger on his left hand in an accident. "I did not consider it a matter of much consequence," he wrote (using his good right hand) in a letter to Clarissa. Somehow this remark seemed to set the tone for his whole life—Lyman bumbled along, shrugging off misadventures that would have discouraged a less optimistic person, while Clarissa and the children followed behind, trying to pick up the debris.

Having made his fortune, Lyman decided not to risk a return trip across the Plains. He chose to go by way of Panama. When he finally reached home in Elyria, it was with a case of yellow fever he had contracted during the journey across the Isthmus.

Clarissa and the children were anxious to move to California. But after nursing Lyman back to health, she found that she would have to turn the house and other holdings into cash in order to raise enough money for the long trip. Lyman, meanwhile, returned to California, this time by ship, to try out another idea: farming.

Letters took about 33 days to reach Ohio from California, and in the long intervals



(From left) Clara, Clarissa, James, and Martha Burrell

between, Clarissa watched the discouraging sight of yet another wagon train setting out. "I think if I had my hands full of cash, I and my children would take a seat in the wagon, too, and set off to find Pa. But the cash is wanting, and I am not ready, so this opportunity will have to pass."

The in-laws were not very enthusiastic about Clarissa and the children moving to California. Uncle Isaac absolutely refused to offer a cent more than \$2000 for his nephew's property, business, and livestock, although Clarissa thought it was worth \$2500. Lyman's sister commented that he would work himself to death out west, and not be able to "carry a peck of bran" by the time his family joined him. The debts, loneliness, and discouragement were almost overwhelming at times.

"I do not know as I am very particular where we live," she wrote wistfully to Lyman in February 1852. "But I should like very much if we might live together somewhere."

But by August, Clarissa was bargaining with would-be buyers, and becoming increasingly indignant: "I believe the men here think it is beneath their dignity to trade with a woman. If they do condescend to do so, they are duty bound to cheat all they can. I am really quite out of heart trying to sell anything here ... have had no offer—only from Uncle Isaac of \$1500. Evidently Uncle Isaac had second thoughts about his original offer, and lowered his bid, sensing that Clarissa was desperate to leave

before winter set in.

She turned to another relative for help: "I tried to borrow some money of Uncle James Burrell. He had it to let, but was afraid I could not give good security. As my husband was absent, he thought a mortgage [mortgage] on the place would not hold."

Somehow, though, all the livestock was sold, the house and the candle factory were sold, the money scraped together, and Clarissa and the children finally boarded the clipper ship *Westward Ho* in Boston on October 16, 1852, for the long voyage around the Horn to San Francisco.

The voyage lasted 103 days, and Clarissa was terribly seasick until the ship reached the tradewinds of the Pacific, off the northwest coast of South America. The children, Eliza, 16 (Lyman's daughter by his first wife); Birney, 12, and the "man" of the family for the last three years; Martha, 9; and her little sister Clara, 7, soon found out that not only did the ship's captain abhor children, but that he was drunk during most of the voyage.

When they arrived in San Francisco on Monday morning, January 31, 1853, they had to wait three days aboard the ship, in sight of their long-awaited destination. The ship was too large to approach the wharf in the tides. Eventually, they were towed in by a steamer, and found Mr. Cary Peebles, a well-to-do Alviso landowner who arranged their trip on another steamer to Alviso, where Lyman was working on a farm.

After all this, Clarissa ought to have enjoyed a carefree life in California, but it was not to be. Things started off pleasantly enough. Lyman took the family on a strawberry-hunting expedition, to the seashore to eat mussels and admire the starfish, and then he took Birney along on a seal-hunting venture that nearly ended in disaster. “While I was down there,” wrote Birney in his diary, “there was a wave came over the rocks and washed me some ten feet towards the bank. It struck Pa, knocked him over, and carried his hat away which he came very near to losing.” The Burrell bad luck was beginning to reassert itself.

By July, Lyman and Birney were building a twelve-by-twenty-eight foot cabin, which he called “Mountain Home,” up on the Summit ridge. It was partitioned into two rooms: a kitchen with a woodstove for cooking and heating, and a sitting room with a fireplace. Three bedrooms and a pantry were attached to one side of the house, as an afterthought.

Sixteen-year-old Eliza meanwhile had met and married Zenus Sikes, and set up housekeeping in Santa Clara. Clarissa’s health was suffering from the valley climate. When it came time for the family to move to their new home, she made the trip from Santa Clara to Forbes’ Mill in a buggy driven by a lady friend. Lyman had hired two wagons and four yoke of oxen to carry the family and their belongings to the summit. The first night of the journey, the family spread their blankets on the ground near Los Gatos Creek, where a stone flour mill was under construction.

The next day the oxen hauled the wagons over Jones’ Hill, and followed a logging trail as far as a hill on the north side of Moody Gulch, where the Burrells camped the second night. The terrain was getting steeper, and the trail more difficult to follow. By the end of the third day, they had almost reached Mountain Charlie McKiernan’s cabin on the ridge. On the fourth day, they turned south down the summit ridge toward “Mountain Home.”

Lyman’s pleasure in finally reaching their destination was obvious: “We unpacked our goods, and took supper in our own house. We are pleased with our new home and its surroundings. We enjoyed the fine view of those magnificent old mountains on the north. We were delighted to see the waters of the Pacific on the south, nearly fifteen hundred feet below us. It seemed as if we had never seen such gorgeous sunsets as we then saw here.”

Little did Lyman suspect, while he rhapsodized over the beauty of the sunsets, that he had built “Mountain Home” right beside a grizzly bear trail. The first inkling the family had of this was when a bear tore off their gate, which was blocking his path. Undaunted, Lyman set the family up in business, caring for a herd of dairy cows that belonged to a Mr. Wayland. He took his pay in cows, and in two years owned his own herd of twenty-eight milk cows. Clarissa and the children were kept busy milking cows twice a day, churning sixty pounds of butter a week, and making cheese. Satisfied that the family members were suitably occupied, Lyman started another project—planting fruit trees and grape vines on his land—one of his more successful ideas.

Eliza and Mr. Sikes (he is never referred to by his given name in Clarissa’s letters) moved to the Summit area with their three-week-old baby in 1854. Clarissa and the children met the moving party, led by Lyman and daughter Martha, as they entered the Los Gatos Creek canyon with the wagonload of household goods. Unfortunately, a recent forest fire had burned a bridge over one of the ravines, and they were forced to abandon the wagon, transfer the goods onto the horses, and follow the old, steep trail that crossed and recrossed the creek. Clarissa carried her tiny granddaughter on “old sure footed Kate,” the family horse.

“Mr. Sikes carried the babe in his arms over the roughest parts of the road (he was walking). We have quite a time of it,” she continued, “but we arrived at the home before dark, and with much less fatigue than one would imagine. Indeed, we were all quite well the next day, and I commenced washing and cleaning.”

Getting home before dark was a matter of concern to Clarissa. Birney, now about fourteen, had taken on a man’s work from the time the family arrived in Alviso, where he plowed a mile-long field with a team of oxen. He helped his father build “Mountain Home,” and helped his mother milk the dairy herd. Another of his jobs was to haul in the family provisions, brought from San Jose on pack animals, up the steep trail from the creek canyon to the house. In a letter to the relatives back in Ohio, Clarissa wrote, “Birney went down two or three times alone, and did not get back till after dark—I do not feel very easy about him, you may be sure, for the trail passes through the canyon of a creek for about three miles, it is a dismal place after sundown.”

The canyons were indeed dismal after dark. The mountains were home to grizzly bears and mountain lions. Clarissa was only too aware that there were wild animals around their home. Anyone who kept livestock knew the damage they did.

“We have not yet had the satisfaction of seeing any of the monsters that inhabit these mountains and ravines in the shape of grizzly bears, lions, panthers, etc. But we see their tracks, and know of their depredations,” she wrote. They were soon to have this satisfaction, or at least Lyman was. He was attacked by a grizzly bear near his home, and his leg badly mauled.

During his six months of convalescence—while he was hobbling around on an improvised crutch made from a split board—all of the chores fell upon Clarissa and the children. Perhaps during this period Lyman had time to realize that Clarissa needed some additional help. He hired a skilled dairyman for three months to help with feeding and milking the herd.

Clarissa’s description of a cozy winter evening at “Mountain Home” might have had some influence on her brother’s decision to come west and settle near her in the Santa Cruz Mountains. “We find the fireplace quite a luxury during the rainy season. It gives sufficient heat, and seems to chase [sic] away the damp better than a stove. Many a pleasant evening we have spent by the bright cheerful light of our redwood fire. Mr. Burrell, Birney, and Martha reading aloud by turns in some newspaper or entertaining story book while I knit and Clara played with her doll.”

Birney’s diary, faithfully kept from the time he boarded the *Westward Ho*, noted that on February 10, 1857, his mother was going to the valley for medical treatment. In Clarissa’s absence, the milking, churning, gardening, laundry, and cooking had to be taken over by the children. It is no surprise that the diary-keeping had to be set aside for awhile. The diary is blank from May 28 to October 25, 1857, and Clarissa’s last letters to her relatives in the east were not dated. It is believed that she died some time during this period.

Just as there was no exact record of her death, there is no certainty where her grave is located. In 1949, Mrs. Clara B. Hirsch, her granddaughter, answering an inquiry about Clarissa, wrote “Grandmother was buried in the mountains on their property... later becoming the property of Miss Martha Burrell.”