

From Marlene Wiley's *Mountain History Archive*
Women of the Santa Cruz Mountains

Josephine Clifford McCracken

Joan B. Barriga

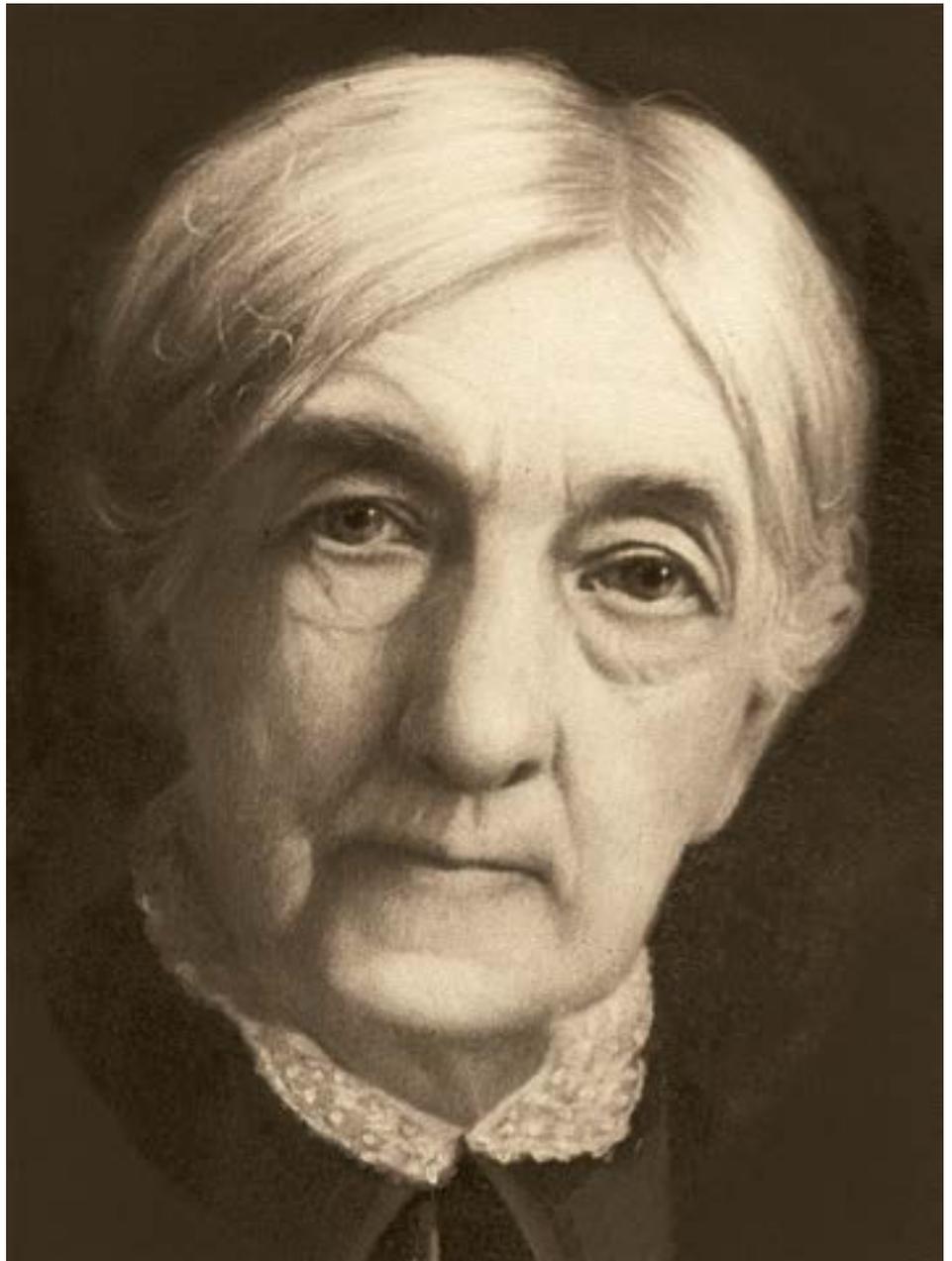
Looking at the smoking ruins of Monte Paraiso, Josephine McCracken knew that the flames had destroyed more than a house. A dream that had been years in the building was destroyed in a few terrible hours when the forest fire surrounded the house on the Summit Ridge near Loma Prieta. Despite the heroic efforts of the neighbors and friends, her home was in ashes, and all around her lay the blackened giant redwoods--trees that had stood through the centuries, and had more recently escaped the axes of the loggers.

Even now, an idea was developing in her mind: was it possible that she could make other people aware that they were losing one of their most unique natural gifts--to awaken them in time to save what was left of the great trees before accident or progress wiped them out? The urgency of this cause was the beginning of a small conservation group who had been directly involved in the great fire of 1899, the people who lived in and around Summit Ridge.⁶³ When photographer Andrew P. Hill came to photograph the devastation of the fire, Josephine enlisted him in the fight to save the redwoods, and the Sempervirens Club had its beginning.

Josephine was a writer and her articles appeared frequently in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. Her stories about the fire and the heroism of the firefighters to save their homes and land stirred public interest to the point that preservation of the magnificent trees became a matter of statewide concern. Hill's photographs provided the graphic evidence of the destruction while Josephine's articles brought the element of human loss to the reader. Together, the combination resulted in the State Legislature creating Big Basin, the first redwood park in California.

It must have been gratifying to her to have been a part of this public awakening, to have influenced through her writings not only the public, but the law-making body of the state to take action on an important matter. She had not always had this kind of influence, and it was almost a symbol of how much her life had changed.

She came to the Santa Cruz Mountains



in 1881 as Josephine Clifford, a single woman, forty-two years old, in search of a quiet place of her own after a particularly disturbing experience. The daughter of German parents living in St. Louis, she had been well-educated in private schools and later at the Externat of the Sacred Heart Convent School. She took a job as a teacher after finishing her schooling, and in 1864 she met and married Lt. James A. Clifford, a cavalry officer.

When the Civil War ended, Lt. Clifford's Third Cavalry unit was sent to Ft. Union, New Mexico, to take part in the army's final effort to break the resistance of the Apaches. She traveled with the troops, as many army wives did, from Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, to New Mexico, and write about the long

trip in "Marching with the Command." As barren and lonely as Ft. Union was, it at least had a few adobe buildings to give a feeling of some protection; but before long, Lt. Clifford's group was moved to the outpost of Ft. Bayard, Arizona, where he and Josephine lived in a large tent.⁶⁴

Once the novelty of the place wore off and the boredom of routine military life set in, there was nothing much to do but talk; and it seemed that James Clifford had something on his mind that he needed to talk about. He confided to Josephine that James Clifford was not his real name. He had changed his name and joined the Union Army in order to escape the Texas Rangers. And why were the Rangers pursuing him? Well, it seemed that he had killed a man in



one night to find him standing over her with a hatchet, threatening to cut off her head. Another time he tied her to the bed and held his service revolver to her head, squeezing the trigger several times while the hammer snapped against the empty chamber, threatening to kill her if she talked to anyone about his past. His behavior was driving her insane, and she could see no way out.

One day Josephine finally managed to elude James' watchful eye long enough to appeal to his commanding officer, who immediately arranged to provide her with a military escort out of Ft. Bayard. The distraught Lt. Clifford was placed under guard and eventually discharged from the army. Josephine never saw him again.

Since her mother, brother, and sister were now living in San Francisco, Josephine went there and obtained a job at the South Cosmopolitan School, teaching German; but her first love was writing, and before long her articles were being accepted by the *Overland Monthly*, a well-known magazine edited by Bret Harte and later by Ambrose Bierce. She began to number among her acquaintances such literary figures as Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, Jack London, and poet George Sterling. It was a far cry from the nightmare she had been living.

Artists, writers, and musicians were moving into the Santa Cruz Mountains as they became more accessible. Josephine was one of the first to take up land near the small German settlement of Austrian Gulch in the shadow of Loma Prieta. There were very few single women living in the mountains at that time, but it might be assumed that after all Josephine had been through she didn't mind a little solitude.

During the summer of 1882, while visiting friends in Arizona, she met Jackson McCracken, Speaker of the Territorial Legislature. They were married later that

Texas; self defense, of course. Now that he had relieved his conscience by confessing to his wife, perhaps he could rest easier. But something kept gnawing away at James Clifford; he began to watch Josephine more closely, to see how she spent her time and who her companions were. After all, she now had information that could destroy him if it ever came to the attention of his commanding officer.

The fear that his wife might betray him became an all-consuming obsession, and in order to have any peace, Clifford—half-crazy by now—decided he would have to frighten her into keeping his secret.

The first hint Josephine had that James' mind had snapped was when she awoke



year in Salinas. After the fire destroyed Monte Paraiso, the McCrackens rebuilt their home and stayed in the Santa Cruz Mountains until Jackson's death in 1904.

Once more alone, Josephine moved to Santa Cruz and found a new home, which she appropriately named "Gedenkheim" (Memory House), perhaps because she brought to it twenty-three years of cherished memories from the Santa Cruz Mountains. She continued her writing career and her efforts to protect the wildlife and redwood forests of the state until her death in 1921 at the age of eighty-two.

⁶³ Patricia Loomis, "Early Settlers Saved the Redwoods," *San Jose News*, November 10, 1973.

⁶⁴ Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

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