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by

Sharlot M. Hall

(From OUT WEST, v.29, Aug.1908)

OLIVE A. OATMAN—HER CAPTIVITY WITH THE APACHE INDIANS, AND HER LATER LIFE

By *SHARLOT M. HALL.*



STORIES of the captivity of white women with various Indian tribes have been part of the romance and tragedy of the frontier from New England westward; but the Apaches of the Southwest seldom burdened themselves for any length of time with white captives of either sex, and Olive A. Oatman is the only white woman who survived the hardships of an extended captivity among them. That she did so survive was due in part to the fact that she was a strong young girl accustomed to outdoor life; and also to the fact that she was taken in the early years of their contact with white people and before treachery and wanton offense on both sides had aroused the spirit of relentless extermination which later marked their attitude toward all white persons who fell into their hands.

In 1850, the "Great American Desert" still swept almost unbroken to the western ocean—a vast, unexplored region of which little was known except that it was the grim barrier that stood between the East and the new-found gold of California. Thirst and hunger were in it, and interminable days of weary travel, and Death was the toll-master on every road. But there was never a price men would not pay for gold, and while the reports from that distant treasure-land were still vague and uncertain, long lines of white-topped wagons were heading into the wilderness.

Experience soon divided the westward movement into two great streams, one bending northward along the north fork of the Platte river into Utah and Nevada, and down over the Sierra Nevada mountains into the Sacramento valley. The other turned to the south along the old Santa Fé trail, thence following the wagon-road made by Lieutenant-Colonel Cooke and his Mormon batallion in 1846 to the old Spanish town of Tucson.

From Tucson to Los Angeles the road traversed as grim a stretch of desert as was ever bridged by human hope and endurance; but being much nearer for parties from the lower Mississippi and Gulf States, and for the most part free of snow in winter, this southern road was travelled by thousands. It cut through the very heart of the Indian country; but in the beginning nearly all the tribes were friendly, and the Apaches, so soon to leave their trail of blood across a quarter of a century, had shown a disposition to welcome the Americans.

On August 9th, 1850, a party of about fifty emigrants left the town of Independence, Missouri, bound westward by the southern

route. Among them were Royse Oatman, his wife, and seven children. He was a native of western New York, but had come by slow stages through Pennsylvania and Illinois. As early as 1849 men returning from the war with Mexico brought to his Illinois home the most glowing accounts of the valley lying at the junction of the Gila and Colorado rivers, and tried to organize a party for colonization there.

Mr. Oatman had been in failing health from an accidental injury received some while before and this, with business reverses, led him to consider seeking a home in a milder climate. He had relatives in California, and it was his purpose to go on there if the Colorado river valley did not impress him favorably.

Many of the families in the train were bound for California, but several who had come with Mr. Oatman from Illinois were intending to remain on the Colorado river if it proved a desirable locality, and this was the first American train to set out with the purpose of settling in what is now Arizona.

All of the party were fairly well supplied with wagons, cattle, and household goods, and carried, as did every west-bound outfit in those days, what was believed to be sufficient food for some months, and a stock of articles suitable for barter with the Indians from whom further food-stuffs might be obtained.

While summer lasted, the travel day by day was pleasant, but at the approach of winter dissensions arose as to the plans and leadership, and in the Santa Fé pass the party divided. The larger number chose to follow a more northern route, leaving the Oatman family and their neighbors to go south toward Tucson. This division, which followed the loss of a considerable number of horses and mules by theft of the Indians, and other mishaps, left the smaller party short of animals; and these were soon further reduced by other Indian depredations, and by the poor and scant growth of grass along the way, which offered uncertain and insufficient grazing.

The slow travel made necessary by the weakened animals also reduced the store of food, and it was found difficult to buy more at the few Mexican villages, where, as for the Indians, a season of unusual drouth had spoiled the crops. The idea of settling on the Colorado river was abandoned, and the party of eight wagons and twenty persons pushed on with what speed they might toward California by way of Tucson and Fort Yuma.

While encamped to rest the teams and increase the food-supply by hunting twenty head of stock were driven off by the Apache Indians, and it became necessary to abandon part of the wagons and goods—a frequent happening on the emigrant trails then and later.

Short of food for themselves, and with their cattle weary and foot-sore, the Oatman party entered what is now Arizona in January, 1851, proceeding by short stages. The horses had all been lost or stolen, the surplus cattle had been killed for food, and cows were yoked to many of the wagons in place of the lost oxen.

At Tubac they were warmly welcomed by the handful of Mexican inhabitants, who craved the protection of the Americans against the Apaches, by whom the little town was constantly harried. They were given such food as could be spared, offered lands for farming, and urged to stay a year at least. This they felt was impossible, as their own number was too small to afford safety to themselves or their hosts.

At Tucson, also, they were begged to stay and take up farms; but at both places the drouth had cut short provisions, and the Apache raids rendered any business unprofitable and nearly impossible. It would clearly cost the Americans all they possessed merely to live until another crop season came round; a few could afford to remain, but Mr. Oatman, with two of his neighbors moved on to the Pima Indian villages at Maricopa Wells, with the hope of trading what household goods they could still spare for corn, wheat, and mesquite beans, with which these peaceful Indians often supplied passing emigrant trains.

The drouth, however, had reached the Pimas as well, and instead of having grain to spare they were themselves close to famine. Their young men returning from other points confirmed the reports of Apache raids all along the Gila river and strongly urged the entire party of Americans to return to Tucson at once and remain till the journey was safer.

Two families decided to do this, but Mr. Oatman felt that his means were becoming too slender to permit delay if he would reach his relatives in California. When Dr. John LeConte, a scientist and traveller who had spent some time on the Pacific Coast, passed through Maricopa Wells on his way from Yuma to Tucson and said that he had seen no Indians, Mr. Oatman decided that it was as safe to proceed as to remain where they were.

It was a sad parting there in the desert, when the Oatmans drew off and their white-topped wagons moved slowly into the gray, desolate waste of sand and grease-wood that lay between them and the Colorado river. More than one had premonition that it was an eternal farewell, and Mrs. Oatman was especially sad and reluctant to enter the wilderness alone with her little brood.

They still had two wagons, and though so much of their household goods had been sold or traded, the loads were too heavy for the poor cows who now supplied the places of oxen in the yokes.

Their progress was so slow that on the seventh day they were overtaken by Dr. LeConte and his guide returning from Tucson to Yuma. They were then about ninety miles distant from that place, and it was apparent to the experienced traveller as well as to Mr. Oatman that without assistance they would never reach the fort.

Dr. LeConte had only his saddle horse and a Mexican guide and could render no immediate assistance, but he hurried on as rapidly as possible, bearing a letter from Mr. Oatman to Major Heintzelman, the commander of the United States troops at Fort Yuma, and promised to do all in his own power to hurry the aid so sorely needed.

The following night the Apaches robbed LeConte of his horses and only a narrow chance saved his life. He was a man of too much experience to underestimate the danger, and the one hope for his own life and that of the party behind lay in reaching Yuma at the earliest possible moment. On the stump of a tree beside the road he posted a card warning the Oatmans and then hurried forward on foot.

It was never surely known, but his surviving children believed that Mr. Oatman found this warning and destroyed it, to spare his family added anxiety. Their dark fate seemed closing in rapidly; they missed their way, and after dragging through the deep sand till the cattle could go no farther, they were forced to make camp for the night on a low island in the Gila river.

As the night came on a sand-storm swept over them, rolling the river up in great wind-lashed waves, drenching their clothes, bedding and provision. The driving sand stung their faces and beat on the weary cattle till they bellowed with fear. It seemed they would overturn the wagons in their terror, and Mr. Oatman and Lorenzo, the fourteen-year-old son, sat up all night trying to quiet the poor, faithful creatures that had brought them so far.

It was terrible above all that had yet befallen them. The babe in Mrs. Oatman's arms wailed pitifully, and the other children crept with their mother into one of the wagons, where they huddled together, shivering with cold and silent with fear. Before the long night was over, Mr. Oatman's courage broke down, and, leaning against one of his trembling oxen, he gave way to tears.

The storm spent itself before sunrise, and with all possible haste the family resumed their journey. The road was particularly difficult, and at a point where the trail led up a steep bluff to a small rocky plain they were compelled to unload the wagons and proceed by hitching all the cattle to one wagon and so take them up one at a time. They carried up much of the goods on their backs, and it was after noon before they were ready to go on.

All the while Mrs. Oatman and the children had watched the hills in all directions with keen anxiety. At last she gave a sigh of relief and said: "Thank God, we are so far on the road safely! There seems to be no danger—no one is in sight." Even as she spoke Olive, the second daughter, called to her father that the Indians were coming, pointing down the road behind, where several moving black objects were to be seen.

Mr. Oatman assured his family that the objects were not Indians, and that, if they were, there was nothing to fear. Yet it was apparent to them all that he was very much alarmed and retained his self-control with the utmost difficulty. He made no effort to resist the Indians, or to prevent their entering the camp when they approached, and at no time attempted to defend himself or his family.

The Indians, about fifteen in number, were armed only with clubs, rude knives, and a few bows and arrows. They were surly and insolent from the first, and demanded food and tobacco. Mr. Oatman was afraid to refuse, although he explained to them that his own family were in need of all the food they had, and that he had sent a messenger to ask help from Fort Yuma.

The Indians withdrew a short distance and entered into a discussion. Mr. Oatman continued loading the wagons and yoking the cattle for the afternoon's journey. All members of the family except the youngest rendered what assistance they could, and the party were scattered around the two wagons when the Indians started toward them yelling and brandishing their clubs.

Mr. Oatman was felled at once. Mrs. Oatman was clubbed and the babe in her arms was killed with a lance thrust. The largest boy, Lorenzo, was hastily clubbed and thrown over a ledge of rock at the edge of the little mesa. The seventeen-year-old daughter, Lucy, fell beside the wagon where she was trying to protect the smaller children, and it will never be known what whim of a moment led the Indians to take two of the younger girls, Olive Ann and Mary Ann, prisoners instead of killing them there with the rest of the party.

Probably the fear that help might arrive from Yuma led to the haste with which the Indians rifled the wagons of the food and such light articles as took their fancy and hurried away, driving the cattle and the two girls before them. This haste saved the life of Lorenzo Oatman, and led to the recovery of Olive five years later.

The Indians travelled rapidly till late at night, and started on again at daybreak. They purposely chose the driest and most difficult route to discourage pursuers and to avoid meeting other war-parties. One such war-party they did meet, and the girls barely

escaped death from the angry leader who wrangled with their captors as to the folly and danger of holding white prisoners.

The second night, being in safer country, the Indians killed one of the cattle and feasted on its flesh, toasting it in strips before the fire and baking great chunks wrapped in the hide. The next day they reached the home ranchería, and the poor captives, tired and footsore from the long march and stunned by the awful fate of their parents and their own probable future, were turned over to the women and children to experience a cruelty before which the previous days of travel were nothing.

After her release Olive could never speak of this night and the days that followed, when she and her sister begged the Indians in vain to kill them and be done with it. The first year was one of extreme misery; the girls planned often for escape and even tried to save such food as they could from their scant supply for flight when the chance should offer; but all thought of such an attempt was abandoned as Mary grew weaker.

Very slowly the white girls passed from toys of savage cruelty to drudges for the entire ranchería, beaten, as Olive says in the story written after her release, if they were seen to stand idle a moment. They brought wood, tended the fires, gathered grass-seeds in the conical baskets of woven bear-grass, and toiled with the squaws in the big mescal-bakings.

Their food was for the most part gathered in the hills, the nomad tribe wandering wherever cactus fruits, grass-seeds, or edible roots might be found. There were times of plenty, with game and mesquite beans, and horses and mules brought in from plundered wagon-trains and eaten—as like as not raw and without salt. Worms, grasshoppers, crickets, lizards, insects and small rodents were sought and eaten in time of scarcity; but the favorite food was meat boiled to a mush in a clay "tusquin" or pot and thickened with any available seeds.

The desolate desert foot-hills in which the band roamed furnished scant and uncertain food; the Indians were themselves more often than not near to starving and their captives had barely enough to keep them alive. From time to time other Indians, the Mojaves from the Colorado river, came into the camp to trade and the girls heard rumors that they were to be sold. They talked together with pathetic hopefulness that some such chance might send them into kinder hands where food was more plentiful.

After something more than a year with their captors, they were traded to the Mojaves, and with their new owners made the journey on foot to the Mojave village on the Colorado river above Bill Williams' Fort. Here they found the Indians living in huts that

were comfortable in comparison to the brush shelters of their former owners; a good stream of water flowed through the little valley, and along its banks small fields were cultivated.

The white girls entered the village with something of hope, which was in a sense justified; for their new owners raised small quantities of grain and melons, and mesquite trees were fairly abundant in the valley and their beans formed the main food-supply of the tribe. Though still the common slaves and drudges of the tribe, the girls received less physical abuse than when with the Apaches, and found two real friends in the wife and daughter of the chief. They were given a very small piece of ground, and wheat, corn, and melon-seeds with which to plant it for their own use.

The Mojaves, like the mountain tribes, were improvident. They feasted and fattened in times of rain and consequent plenty, and starved miserably in years of drouth. There was little game in their country, and their chief food was a mush made of mesquite beans ground to a coarse meal and boiled in water. The grinding of this meal was a constant task of the captives; they were sent daily to gather grass-seeds and edible roots, and whatever fruits or berries might be found; but their food was doled out in the most scanty portions, and they were always hungry.

Several times during the first year they were accused of intending to escape, and one day two medicine-men came to the chief's house and tattooed the captives with a mark, or "ki-e-chook," by which they might be recognized in such case. It was not the mark worn by the Mojave women, though similar. It was made by pricking the skin along the chin and out from the mouth with a very sharp stick till it bled freely. The stick was then dipped into the juice of a weed that grew on the banks of the river and then in the powder of a blue stone that was to be found at low water in some parts of the stream-bed, and which was burned and pulverized, thereby turning nearly black. This fine powder was pricked into the wounds and left an indelible mark, blue-black in color and very disfiguring, which Olive bore to the day of her death. The process of marking was quite painful, and the girls saw it repeated upon other captives later.

Their first year among the Mojaves was in some ways the easiest of their captivity, and Olive pathetically records how the scant patches of grain reminded them of their Illinois home and the fields their father had planted.

The second year the drouth returned, and the poor children, starving themselves, were forced to travel for miles through the foot-hills bearing the "chiechuck," the rude burden-basket, and

gathering grass-seeds and beans of the palo verde, mesquite, and iron-wood for their hungry masters.

Many of the Indians died and Mary Ann became too weak to follow Olive in search of food. The elder sister wandered for days through the hills, hunting birds' eggs and roots to sustain the dying child. She has told how the Indians gathered to listen as Mary in her last hours tried to sing the songs they had been taught at home.

This sad music touched the heart of a Mojave woman, the wife of the chief, who had already shown some kindness to the captives. The Mojaves burn their dead in rude pyres of dry wood, but Olive longed to bury her sister. At the request of his wife the chief permitted a grave to be made in the tiny plot of ground which the white girls had cultivated, and gave Olive a blanket in which to wrap her sister's body.

After the burial the same woman brought food to Olive, grinding part of her own scant hoard of seed-corn to make a soup for the starving, grief-stricken girl. This she did with the utmost stealth, for her own relatives were starving and dying.

In a short time Olive grew strong enough to gather seeds in the hills, and so managed to live till spring. Her chief food was the small bulb of a sort of wild hyacinth, still gathered and eaten by the Indians, and some of these dried bulbs she kept long after her release.

The third year the Colorado river overflowed abundantly, irrigating the fields of corn and melons and causing the mesquite trees to bear an extra crop of beans. Much food was harvested, and in the late fall the Mojaves planned a big feast in a little valley to the north, where they were joined by other bands from all along the river.

Olive was ordered to help the squaws carry the camp belongings to the feasting-place, and assist them in cooking the piles of food which would be eaten during the three days of sport. She went with great reluctance; these feasts were times of the most unrestrained indulgence and were dreaded by the squaws as well as the captives. An intoxicating drink was made by fermenting corn and mesquite-bean meal in water with various roots, and rude dances and much gambling filled the intervals of eating and drinking.

Almost immediately after coming to the Mojaves the captive girls saw signs of contact with the white people. Some of the women wore scraps of calico and red flannel, the latter being especially prized, and beads and cotton handkerchiefs were now and then brought in by the men. Olive tried to learn where these

things came from, but was warned that if she asked questions she would be killed.

Captives were sometimes brought in by war-parties, and from a Mexican woman Olive learned that there were a small number of white people far down the river. If she had any thought of escape it was given up when she witnessed the burning of a Cocopah woman, a captive who tried to get away and was retaken. She was warned often that this would be her own fate if she tried to run away.

The Mojaves were joined in the big feast by representatives of the various river tribes, including some Yumas from near Fort Yuma. In the gambling one of the Yumas won some horses from a member of the band to which Olive was captive, and came over to the encampment to get his property. There was more or less wrangling about the payment, and he was offered Olive and the Mexican woman in place of the horses. He refused to take them and rode away with the horses, but this seemingly trifling incident put in motion a chain of events leading back to that blood-stained mesa above the Gila river and destined at last to restore both captives to their friends.

When Lorenzo Oatman recovered from the stunning blow which left him unconscious for hours at the foot of the cliff where the Apaches flung him in their haste, he crawled painfully back to the little flat to find the dead and mutilated bodies of his parents and of all his brothers and sisters except Olive and Mary Ann, whom he dimly remembered struggling in the grasp of two Indians.

Though terribly wounded, Lorenzo crawled around the wagons till he found some scraps of bread and a little brown sugar, which he ate. He then started to walk and crawl as best he might back to Maricopa Wells. He was in a delirium of pain from his wounds and fear of prowling Indians, and when he stopped to rest the coyotes came so near that he was afraid to sleep, but kept waving one hand to keep them off.

He had gotten into the desert near Gila Bend when he saw Indians coming toward him. He tried to hide in the grease-wood, but they saw him, and, coming up, recognized him as one of the party from Maricopa Wells. They were friendly Maricopas; they gave the boy food and water and rode on to the little mesa to verify his story. Returning, they took him back to Maricopa Wells, where he found the Wilders and Kelleys with their oxen yoked ready to continue the journey to Yuma.

Three days later, lying on a bed in one of the wagons, Lorenzo Oatman started back over that desolate road. At the little mesa, since known as Oatman's Flat, the emigrants stopped to bury the

torn bodies of their former friends in one shallow grave. A year later the Bartlett expedition passed the spot and reburied the scattered bones of the unfortunate family. The mesa was still strewn with such of their goods as the Indians had not chosen to take away; the wagons had been partly burned and trunks and chests broken open and their contents littered about.

At Fort Yuma Lorenzo was kindly received and remained in the hospital for two months. He begged help from the commander, Major Heintzelman, to trace and retake his sisters; but the force of troops available was small and the massacre had taken place on Mexican soil, so the commander held that he had no authority to punish the offenders. He sent out a small number of men under Captain Davis, but they did little more than heap a higher mound of stones over the bodies of the emigrants.

In the physician at Fort Yuma, Dr. Hewit, and in Henry Grinnell, the post carpenter, Lorenzo Oatman found two unfailing friends. Dr. Hewit cared for the wounded boy, and with Grinnell gave him money and urged him to go on to his father's relatives in California. Henry Grinnell was a nephew of that Grinnell who sent rescue-parties in search of Sir John Franklin; the pathetic fate of the captive girls aroused his keenest sympathy, and he assured Lorenzo that he would never abandon the search for them till they were found.

In California, Lorenzo tried repeatedly to get help to send out a searching party; but, though his story was heard with the utmost sympathy, no one believed that the girls had been kept alive; or that, if they had, they could have survived months of captivity. Yet at Yuma Grinnell had quietly taken up a search almost as hopeless as that for brave Sir John, in a land almost as baffling as the ice floes of the North.

With one purpose always in view, he made friends with as many Indians as possible and encouraged them to come freely to his cabin in the outskirts of Fort Yuma. He attached to himself one warm friend and invaluable assistant, a Yuma Indian named Antonio Francisco. It was through Antonio that he first got trace of the captives. The Yuma who returned from the big feast up the river, boasted of his winnings and told of the women that had been offered to him in place of the horses.

In a flash Grinnell seized upon this incident, and through Antonio followed it up till he knew what band held the captives and where they were living. He knew that the rescue must proceed with the utmost caution, for one false move might send the women to some distant tribe or to a violent death.

It was decided that gambling was the safest cover, and Antonio

offered to win the women if the necessary goods were furnished him.

Mr. Grinnell bought two horses, and the post commander, Colonel Martin Burke, gave beads, trinkets and blankets. He had little faith in Antonio Francisco or any other Indian and felt none of Mr. Grinnell's hopefulness, though he gave Antonio a letter to Olive, if he should find her, and authorized him to demand her release in the name of the United States.

At parting Antonio asked two months' time in which to bring in the captives. As the weeks slipped by, and no word came from him, Mr. Grinnell was both blamed and laughed at for trusting an Indian. Late one evening, near the end of the time set, a Yuma boy brought word that Antonio was within six miles of the post, but the women were tired and could not walk farther, and he wished also some clothes for them, as they were dressed only in skirts of cottonwood bark.

Horses and clothing were sent in haste, and the whole post waited the arrival of the party with excitement. There was great disappointment when Antonio rode in with two squaws whose dark faces were heavily tattooed. In Olive's case the doubt was quickly settled by her blue eyes and brown hair, which, though rough and sun-burned and worn in Indian fashion, was still that of a white woman.

The poor captives were taken to the homes of kind people at the post, and the Mexican woman was later sent to her people. Olive did not recognize anyone till her brother came from California, when she took a pathetic interest in talking with him of their childhood and of the tragedy which left them alone in the world.

Of her release, she told that the Yuma came into the camp of her owners and gambled and made friends with them. They thought for a while that he had killed some white men and gotten the beads and blankets. He gave Olive Colonel Burke's letter and she had much trouble to read it after five years in which she had not seen a written word.

Antonio urged the Mojaves to give up the captives, and at last got them to hold a council to decide. He made an eloquent plea for their release and threatened the Mojaves with severe punishment at the hands of the troops at Fort Yuma if they refused. From a distance Olive listened to the discussion, scarcely daring to hope for release. When ordered to go with the Yuma she dared not show any gladness for fear her owners would change their minds merely to see her disappointment.

She felt really grieved at parting with the kind wife of the chief and at leaving the grave of her sister. Before letting her go the Mojaves took from her all the bits of red flannel and calico she had and the strings of beads which had been given her for singing to them. She brought away only a few of the wild hyacinth roots, which she concealed in her bark skirt and kept for years after.

For many years it was not known what Indians killed the Oatman family and captured Olive and Mary. The Tonto Apaches, an offshoot of the Apache tribe nicknamed "Tontos," or fools, were suspected, and long after one of the men who participated told the whole story to Al Sieber, General Crook's chief of scouts.

The long captivity and slavery of Olive Oatman ended in March, 1856. With her brother she went to California and on to her relatives in Oregon. Returning to California, the brother and sister spent six months in school in the Santa Clara valley. A clergyman, the Rev. R. B. Stratton, became interested in them and published the story of their lives and of Olive's captivity and rescue. The book had a large sale, above thirty thousand copies, and the money from it was used for the further education of the two orphans.

In March, 1858, Olive went by steamer to New York with Mr. Stratton and his family. Her father had relatives near Rochester, with whom she lived. She attended school in Albany for some time and later lectured on the habits and customs of the Indians and her captivity. While lecturing she met John B. Fairchild, and they were married in Rochester in November, 1865.

She removed with her husband to Michigan, where they lived for seven years and from there went to the town of Sherman, Texas, where she died in March, 1903. The later life of Olive Oatman was as quiet and peaceful as her girlhood was tragic. In her beautiful home, guarded by her devoted husband, she gave herself up to many noble charities, especially the care of orphan children. One of these, an adopted daughter, nursed her tenderly in her last illness of a year.

Olive Oatman carried to the end the girlish look of the rude little engraving published in the story of her life as written by Mr. Stratton. She was quiet and reserved; the great suffering of her early life set her apart from the world, but she was a noble, helpful woman, always first to aid the sick and poor, and especially children in need. She was a woman of much intelligence and strength of character, and even as a girl must have been able to meet difficulties with rare courage.

Born in 1837 she was fourteen at the time her family met their sad fate, and she was herself taken into slavery such as few have survived. She was a woman of twenty when she returned to civilization and took up her education from books and schools. The sadness of her early experiences never quite lifted, as the blue-black tattooed mark of the Mojave captive never left her face, but to the end her long life was useful and unselfish, and she is kept in loving memory in the town which was her home for more than thirty years.

Some years ago it was rumored that she had died in an insane asylum in New York, and Bancroft records, without endorsing, the story.

She was never insane, nor did she live in New York after 1865. Hundreds of people yet live who knew her during her long residence in Texas, and can bear witness to her clearness of mind and nobility of character.

Dewey, Arizona.