

Aunt Olive

California's First Pioneer Teacher

“My first teaching in California was commenced in the month of December, 1846 in a room about fifteen feet square, with neither light nor heat other than that which came through a hole in the tile roof.”

Olive Mann Isbell (1824-1899)

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*Dedicated to my Mother,
who would have been
a remarkable pioneer woman,
had she been born another time,
another place,
and to Aunt Polly,
who made my writing possible
thanks to her exhaustive research.*

Acknowledgments

My husband, Paul, did all the cooking and housework while I was busy writing. My five-year old daughter, Julia, often sat on my knees and helped me type. I am grateful to both for their loving support.

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Preface

“Here is something you will enjoy reading,” my mother-in-law told me during my last visit to California, handing me a century-old leather-bound notebook with yellowing pages. That evening, I curled up on the couch and opened it to the following inscription: “To be kept in memory of Aunt Olive, my Father’s sister, who has passed away from the toils of Earth, to the Rest of Heaven. Died March 26th 1899.” The ink had faded, but the beautiful script was still legible. I started reading and was immediately captivated.

In 1846, California was at war and a group of pioneers sought refuge in Santa Clara mission. After a dangerous six-month journey across Indian territories, they now had to deal with starvation, disease and the threat of an imminent attack. Most of the men went to fight in Southern California, leaving the women and the children to cope as well as they could.

Among the pioneers was a 22-year old bride from Ohio, Olive Mann Isbell. Her husband went to fight, but soon returned, gravely ill from typhoid pneumonia. One would fall apart under less trying circumstances, but Olive was an intrepid young woman, prone to taking constructive action at times of crisis. Her husband needed care; she nursed him. People needed medication; she shared her stock of medicine. Children

also needed looking after, she noticed. They were straying outside mission walls, courting trouble. "I'll open a school," Olive decided. And so she did. Finding an old stable, she had a hole punched in the ceiling for light and opened the first American school in California.

Fascinated, I read on. The pages I turned were doted with historic names: the Donner Party, Chief Truckee, Johann Augustus Sutter, John C. Frémont, Commodore Stockton, General Ord, General Stephen W. Kearny, General William T. Sherman, Kit Carson: Olive met them all. She lived through the Gold Rush, traveled to Panama and Mexico, moved to Texas, lost everything during the Civil War, returned to California and tried again. Through it all, she displayed an indomitable spirit. I was intrigued.

"If you are interested in Aunt Olive, here is more for you to read," Aunt Pauline Felix told me a few days later, handing me a thick file of materials she had assembled over the years while researching the life of Aunt Olive.

I read the file with eagerness and pursued my research on the web. I learned that Aunt Olive spent her last years in Santa Paula, California, where a Middle School is named after her. In this school's website, I discovered her portrait. She looked strong and determined. But as strict as she may have been, she was apparently much cherished. The children called her "Aunt Olive" or "Aunt Ol" and mothers expressed their

everlasting gratitude for all she taught the little ones.¹ In her old age, she was surrounded by friends and visitors: “The young people were entertained by her quaintness and cultivated her society because they loved to hear her talk. She was a universal favorite,” a Ventura County publication reported.²

She had much to say and told great stories. People who heard them remembered them, treasured them and repeated them. The story of her life is begging to be told. Why didn’t she write it? The only autobiography she left is what she wrote on the back of an old

¹ Margaret Hecox, a woman who traveled to California in the same wagon party as Olive Mann Isbell, thanked her in her memoirs: “Mrs. Isbell was a woman who won the everlasting gratitude of us all that winter for her excellent help in caring for our children. Mrs. Isbell organized a little school in one of the old buildings and succeeded in keeping the children occupied and out of mischief and imparted much useful information to the little ones. The rest of us were so busy with the necessary work and caring for the sick that this woman’s help was a god-send to us. She had come overland with us, as a young bride. She was well educated and a very fine young woman.” Margaret M. Hecox, *California Caravan, Overland Memoirs by Margaret M. Hecox*, ed. Richard Dillon (San Jose: Harlan-Young Press, 1966), p. 56.

² E.Y., “Who’s Who in Ventura County, Past and Present,” *Free Press*, Feb. 1924.

photograph³ discovered in her home after she died: “At the request of the Editor of the Ojai, I will briefly narrate my experiences as the first white woman to teach a school in California, leaving the readers free to supply whatever fancy they please to go with my facts,” she

³ Why did she write these words on the back of a photograph? She reminds me of Vincent Van Gogh, who painted his canvas on both sides because he was too poor to buy all the supplies he needed. I fear that this may have been her predicament as well.

wrote. There followed three succinct paragraphs.⁴ Was

⁴ Here is the succinct account written by Olive Mann Isbell on the back of this photograph:

“At the request of the Editor of the Ojai, I will briefly narrate my experiences as the first white woman to teach a school in California, leaving the readers free to supply whatever fancy they please to go with my facts.

My first teaching in California was commenced in the month of December, 1846 in a room about 15 feet square, with neither light nor heat, other than that which came through a hole in the tile roof. The room was in the Santa Clara mission, near San Jose. There most of the families that crossed the Plains that year were housed by Col. J.C. Frémont. I taught the children of my fellow emigrants under great difficulties. We had only such books as we chanced to bring with us across the plains, and as superfluous baggage was not to be thought of, our stock of books was limited. I had about 20 scholars.

When our soldiers were disbanded, some five or six families moved to Monterey, California, where the first American Consul, Thomas O. Larkin, engaged me to teach a three months' term. They specially fitted up a room for me over the jail. I had 56 names enrolled, at \$6 each for the term. Part of the scholars were Spanish and the other part the children of emigrants.

Those were the first “American” schools in California. I came to California first in 1846, and started on my return to Ohio May 1st 1850. In 1857, I went to Texas to live, but left there in 1863. I went to Santa Barbara on Dec. 28th, 1864. I lived on the Ojai two years and came to Santa Paula in March, 1872, where I have resided ever since. I am a Buckeye, born in Ashtabula, Ashtabula County, Ohio. I have been a widow since January 1886. My only support is a Mexican pension of \$8 per month. Olive Mann Isbell, Santa Paula, March 17, 1893” Handwritten copy from family records. Also quoted in “Dr. and Olive Mann Isbell, Pioneers of 1846,” edited by the Staff, *The Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Nov. 1955), p. 2.

she too modest to write more?

Olive Mann Isbell's story deserves to be told. Her life exemplifies courage, spirit and resource-fulness. At a time of war, she reacted constructively by putting her fears and problems aside and focusing on the children's safety and education. Never mind that there was no light, no heat, no supplies. Undaunted by obstacles, she sought solutions.

This story is especially instructive in light of the events of September 11th, 2001. While we have witnessed acts of terrorism of an unprecedented magnitude, we are not the first to deal with terror or with war. Olive Mann Isbell faced more than her share of life-threatening events. But instead of breaking her spirit, adversity brought out her courage and generosity. Her story is an inspiration.

I gathered all the stories and anecdotes I found about Olive Mann Isbell and retold them as faithfully as I could. Since Olive gave her readers permission to use their fancy, I did sprinkle some fancy, but only a smidgen.⁵ With facts like these, who needs fancy?

⁵ The few parts of my account that come from my imagination are identified as such in the footnotes.

Introduction

When we crossed the Sierra Nevada on our way to California, we had to haul our wagons over the mountains and then lower them with ropes on the other side. The trail we followed was almost wild, having been broken by only two wagons before us.

I remember an incident as we were taking a break. The going was rough and tempers were flaring. As I was resting, an ox that was loose came kneeling down and put its huge nose on my lap. It looked at me with pleading eyes and then refused to budge. The poor beast was terrified.

It was time to continue. We had made so little progress that day and rain was threatening. One of the men started to coil his whip, aiming to get the ox back on its feet. I could feel a nasty scene coming.

Since I am trained as a midwife,⁶ I have experienced moments like this. With every birth, there comes a time when the mother cries out in exhaustion and panic that she cannot make it and her man (if he

⁶ According to Lorena Clarke Beckley, a woman who shared the home of Mrs. Isbell for several months in 1884 (when Mrs. Isbell was 60 years old), Olive Mann Isbell was a midwife. Lorena Clarke Beckley, *My Memories of Olive Mann Isbell*, unpublished and undated document found in family records.

has lasted that long) turns to me with fear and helplessness in his eyes.

“Calm down, now, everyone,” I said. “Just calm down.” Then I grabbed the ox and looked at it straight in the eyes. “You can make it,” I said. “You are going to get up and pull that wagon over that mountain. Yes, you are. Giddap, old boy! Up and at it.”

I kept staring at that ox and as I freed myself from the weight of its large muzzle and stood up, it followed my gaze and stood up with me.⁷

This is how we made it over the Sierra Nevada in September of 1846 when I was 22 years old.

⁷ This is part fact and part fancy. Olive Mann Isbell did tell the story that an ox was so frightened while going over the Sierra Nevada that it put its head on her lap. The fanciful part is that she calmed the ox by talking to it. Here is how Professor S. F. Peckham, a friend of the Isbells, told the story: “I remember . . . one very vivid picture that she drew of their crossing the Sierra Nevadas over what afterwards became a road, but which then was largely bare rocks. She said, as she was resting, an ox that was loose was so frightened that he came kneeling down on his knees and put his huge nose in her lap, looking up pityingly with his great eyes. They succeeded, however, in reaching the Valley of California near Monterey without any serious mishap.” So who got the ox back on its feet? I imagine Olive taking charge because Dr. S.F. Peckham reported that she was good at leading horses by just talking to them. He related that during an outing with Olive, “[she] asked me if I would let her drive as she was fond of horses. She soon showed me that all she had to do was to talk to the horses and they would mind her.” Professor S. F. Peckham to Hon. Thomas R. Bard, 26 April 1912, Olive Mann Isbell biographical file, Research Library, Ventura County Museum of History and Art, Ventura (Calif.).

How can you get a wagon over a mountain
where there is no road?

“This is the way it was managed: A dozen yoke of oxen were hitched to one wagon, and with hard pulling they reached the top. After all the wagons were over, we took lunch on the top of the mountains, and then prepared to go down, which was more dangerous than going up, for in places the mountain was very steep. One yoke of oxen was hitched to a wagon, and one at a time went down. Heavy chains were fastened on behind the wagon and as many men as could catch hold of the chains did so, and when the wagon started they pulled back to keep the wagon from running down the mountain and killing the oxen. . . . I must pay tribute to our wheel oxen, Dick and Berry, who drew the family wagon all the way across the plains. They were gentle, kind, patient and reliable. I loved them.”

Mary Medley Ackley, 1852

Chapter 1

A Buckeye from Ohio

“I am a Buckeye, born in Ashtabula, Ashtabula County, Ohio.”⁸

I was born on August 8, 1824 in a house staked by moonlight by the North Star to make it square with the world.⁹ My parents, Warner Mann and Amanda Blakeslee Mann, lived by interesting and sometimes peculiar ideas. They sought to anchor our lives with strong religious principles and solid foundations. But I was born with a wandering spirit and nothing could hold me back.¹⁰

⁸ The sentences in italics at the beginning of some chapters are excerpts from Olive Mann Isbell’s autobiography quoted in footnote 4.

⁹ This house is described in “Area Historian Tracks Plymouth Township History to New England,” an undated newspaper article found in family records. One of the first frame houses in the county, it was built in 1819, across the street from the Blakeslee’s orchard.

¹⁰ Most of the information in this chapter comes from Mann family records held by my mother-in-law, Isabel Andres, and her sister, Pauline Felix, in particular from a short biography of Bielby Porteus Mann, Olive’s brother.

The wandering spirit runs in the family. My parents moved to Ohio in 1810, amongst the earliest settlers of Plymouth Township in Ashtabula County. They came from Connecticut with their parents and several friends, all linked by their strong Christian faith. Together they established the first Episcopal Church west of the Alleghenies.

My ancestors all had the wandering blood. On the Mann side, they settled with the Pilgrims near Plymouth in 1644. The Blakeslee were among the earliest settlers of New Haven, Connecticut.

What is a “Buckeye”?

Buckeye is a shrub or tree of the chestnut family.

“Buckeye” is used as a nickname to describe people from Ohio.

My love for teaching? It comes from my family as well. My parents gave me the best education a girl

could hope for at that time and place.¹¹ Education was an important priority for my parents and fellow settlers from Connecticut. My father taught the first school in Plymouth Township in Grandpa Blakeslee's log cabin. Then he opened a school in our own home. When all was quiet on the farm in winter months, my brothers and I took turns teaching. This is how I got my training as a teacher.¹²

Some people say I am the niece of Horace Mann. This is not true, as we are descended from different branches of the Mann family.¹³ But earlier ancestors are doubtlessly related. We are from the same stock and mighty proud of it.

¹¹ Mann family records. See also E.Y., "Who's Who in Ventura County." This information is confirmed by Professor S.F. Peckham in his short undated biography of Olive Mann Isbell, Biographical file, Research Library, Ventura County Museum of History and Art, Ventura (Calif.).

¹² This information comes from E.Y., "Who's Who in Ventura County," and from unpublished Mann family records.

¹³ Olive Mann Isbell is a descendant of Richard Man, who settled in Scituate, Massachusetts, about 1644. (Her ancestors are Warner, Zadock, Joseph, Nathaniel, Richard, Richard). George S. Mann, *The Genealogy of the Descendants of Richard Man of Scituate, Mass.* (Boston: Press of David Clapp & Son, 1884), p. 149. Horace Mann is descended from the Cambridge or Wrentham branch. He was a descendant of William Man, who settled in Massachusetts about 1607. (His ancestors are Thomas, Nathan, Thomas, Samuel, William), *ibid.* p. 27.

Who was Horace Mann?

Horace Mann (1796-1859), a legislator and educator, has been called the father of the American Public School. He worked to increase the availability and quality of public school education.

I am the seventh of fifteen children. My father was a farmer, a teacher, and the first Justice of the Peace in Plymouth Township. Most of my brothers and sisters stayed in Ohio. When I was fourteen years old, my older brothers William and Bielby left for Knox County, Illinois in an emigrant wagon. They worked all winter laying railroad tracks and setting fences. In the spring of 1839, they bought Indian ponies and returned on horseback to Ohio, full of stories that enflamed my imagination.

In my family, we have had our share of misfortune and accidents, like everyone. For instance, my brother Bielby cut his left foot with an axe when he was four years old, severing all the cords in the instep. There was no doctor nearby, so my mother sent for the shoemaker who lived a mile away to sew up his foot. While waiting for help, she sat on the doorstep holding

Bielby's foot.¹⁴ She probably told him a few good stories to help pass the time.

As a little girl, I hurt my feet too. I stepped on burning coals and my feet never healed properly. They have troubled me all my life – but have not kept me from going places, as my travels will attest. When there is a will, there is a way – and where my feet would not take me, my horse went gladly.¹⁵

Except for when my brothers left, life was uneventful at home. I was really no more than a village

¹⁴ Unpublished obituary of Bielby Porteus Mann.

¹⁵ Lorena Clarke Beckley, *My Memories of Olive Mann Isbell*. Lorena Beckley reported that in 1884, when she was a young girl, her family was left homeless after a flood and shared the home of Mrs. Isbell for several months. According to her account, “Mrs. Isbell was a very bright, intelligent woman and although she was handicapped by being slightly crippled, it did not keep her from doing a great deal of good. Her feet were burned in childhood by walking into coals from an open fire. She got about wonderfully well with the tiny crippled feet.” At the Research Library of the Ventura County Museum of History & Art, I saw some pictures of Olive Mann Isbell in a wheelchair as an elderly woman. However in 1893, when Mrs. Isbell described her life, she made no mention of any handicap whatsoever. Mrs. Isbell was evidently not one to complain about an infirmity.

maid.¹⁶ But when I met Dr. Isbell, I knew my life would change.

Isaac Chauncey Isbell was born in 1815 in Ontario County, New York. After moving to Ohio and farming in Illinois, he studied medicine and graduated from Western Reserve College in March 1844.¹⁷ We were married that same month.¹⁸

We soon moved to Greenbush, Warren County, Illinois. The Doctor left first and I traveled by lake steamer to meet him in Chicago. Back then, it was a small trading station, attached to Fort Dearborn. A swamp by the lake with a few log cabins: this is how I remember Chicago.¹⁹ But what an exciting trip for a young bride!

¹⁶ “She lived there an uneventful life as a village maid.” Peckham to Bard, 26 April 1912.

¹⁷ Isaac Chauncey Isbell moved to Aurora, Kane County, Illinois in 1834 and farmed there for 6 years. He then entered the academy at Wadsworth, Ohio, and studied medicine with Dr. Pardee and Prof. Ackley of Cleveland. “Dr. Isaac Isbell: An Interesting Autobiography Found Among Old Papers,” *Ventura County California Chronicle*, May 19, 1899, p. 1.

¹⁸ According to Professor S. F. Peckham, Olive and Isaac were married on March 4, 1844. Peckham, *Biography of Olive Mann Isbell*.

¹⁹ Peckham to Bard, 26 April 1912.

Little did I know that this would be the first of many adventures.

²⁰ Peckham to Bard, 26 April 1912.

If you are interested in reading additional chapters of this booklet, please contact the author:

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