

*The*  
VENTURA COUNTY  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
*QUARTERLY*



OLIVE MANN ISBEL

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# The Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly

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## *From Our President*

During the past few years the idea of county historical societies has grown throughout California. Perhaps it is because as a state we have passed our one hundredth birthday. A few of us began to talk about such an organization for Ventura County. It was taken up with the Native Sons, the Pioneer Society and the Oxnard and Santa Paula Native Daughters Parlors and the four organizations were asked to be the sponsors. Each one appointed a committee to work with similar committees from the others, and the ground work was laid. The organizational committee thus formed was composed of the following: Native Daughters — Mrs. Harold Dudley, Mrs. John Thille, Mrs. C. R. Nieland, and Mrs. Rafaelita Philbrick; Native Sons — J. H. Morrison, L. T. Shiells, C. A. Phleger, A. D. Alvord, Robert Pfeiler, and Chas. Outland; Pioneer Society — Jos. H. Russel, A. Camarillo, R. G. Percy and James H. Roth.

The idea met with popular support at once; and with very little publicity and little solicitation, we had over one hundred charter members by the time an organizational meeting was called on Admission Day, 1955. Seventy five attended the dinner meeting at Pierpont Inn, Ventura, when permanent officers were elected by-laws adopted and committees appointed.

The purposes and aims of the Society are to gather and preserve interesting and factual history of the County. There are letters and diaries of interest that have never been published, and there are people still living with first hand knowledge of early days. This information will be made permanently available through the pages of our QUARTERLY, of which this is our own "First Edition."

R. G. PERCY

# Dr. and Olive Mann Isbel, Pioneers of 1846

Edited by the Staff

The year of 1846 was an eventful one in the history of California. The war with Mexico, so long expected, had at last broken out and Fremont, Stockton and Kearny were busy fighting the Californians wherever they could find them. Later they would fight among themselves even more bitterly. 1846 saw the rapid rise and fall of the controversial Bear Flag Revolt, the influx of a considerable number of emigrants via the overland route and, of course, the terrible tragedy of the Donner Party. Among the emigrants of that year were two who later were to spend many years of their lives in Ventura County: Dr. Isbel and his beautiful wife, Olive Mann Isbel. Mrs. Isbel is usually given credit for having been the first American school teacher in California. Her husband was a prominent figure in the early gold rush days, both as prospector and as an Indian trader.

Legends and stories of the Isbels are numerous; fertile source material is meager. In the sources printed here the discerning reader will note discrepancies, not only in the material itself, but also between it and the many commonly accepted legends that have grown up around this remarkable couple. The notes at the end of the article will endeavor to explain these differences.

Foremost among the source records on the Isbels is the autobiographical sketch left by Mrs. Isbel. This tantalizingly short account was discovered many years after her death, hidden behind a large personal picture.

"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 Colonel John C. Fremont. 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. (1)

Olive Mann Isbell. Santa Paula, March 17, 1893"

It is remarkable that this woman, who could have told so much, actually told so little. It is noticeable also, that she did not once mention her husband in the above sketch. Fortunately, we have other sources with which to fill in the blanks and to gain a better insight into their lives and their times. From the following two letters written by Thomas R. Bard to Pennsylvania relatives we are able to form a much better picture of Dr. Isbel:

February 15, 1866.

"Another of our party is old Dr. Isbel (2) who keeps the hotel. A very eccentric, jolly, queer old cuss, who eternally grumbles about something or other. He came out here long before the gold excitement of '48, was with Fremont as surgeon of his command when he took this Southern California. (3) During the early part of the Rebellion, he lived in Texas; owned one of the finest properties of the State, near San Antonio, but was run out of the country by the 'damned secesh'. Is always talking about going somewhere to get away from 'this miserable nest of S. B. V.' (San Buena Ventura). He says the Apaches shoot golden bullets and he knows where to get them, and wants a party to go with him to hunt the Golden Hill, etc." . . .

Feb. 28, 1867

"I've just left the bedroom of a poor suffering man who has had both legs broken by being thrown from his buggy, and who bears his suffering and prospect with heroic fortitude. Two Sabbaths ago, while going from here to the ranch I found him lying in the road insensible, and both legs broken, and the bone of one protruding through the flesh. With the aid of a native woman, I succeeded in getting him into the bottom of my little wagon, and brought him here. He is one of my best friends and is the old gentleman whom I have probably mentioned in one of my letters. Came here before the gold excitement in '47, (sic) made and spent several fortunes, went to Texas where he owned one of the finest estates in the State, but being loyal to his country, suffered everything but death at the hands of the rebels and was forced to leave his property. He and his wife, one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, came here and opened a hotel, but lost money at the business. At a moment when he was much dejected, I offered him a home and pasturage for his cattle on the Ojai, where he has been for six months, happy and prospering and affording me many a rare treat of wild duck, haunches of venison, and dozens of quail, to say nothing of his narration of incidents in his life's experience. He has traded with the Klamath Indians of the north and fought and killed many a marauding Apache on the borders of Texas. I have shown him all the kindness possible and I do assure you that his 'God bless you' when I take my leave of him, is ample reward. A few days ago I drew up and had him execute his will wherein he bequeaths 2/3 of his Texas property to a nephew, on condition that he go there at once to recover it from 'the infernal, thieving secesh.' I have fought the surgeon from Santa Barbara who

is attending him, and induced him to delay cutting off one leg, which he seemed determined to do, and I think he will now be able to save it.'

One of the Isbel's close friends during the days they lived in Ventura and Ojai was Dr. S. F. Peckham, a University of California chemist, and later associated with the Union Oil Co. In a lengthy letter to Mr. Bard, dated April 26, 1912, Peckham wrote concerning the Isbels: (Portions are deleted)

Hon. Thomas R. Bard  
Hueneme, California

My Dear Sir:

I told you some time ago, when it was convenient, I would give you some memoranda, concerning the Isbells. The details of these memoranda as related are partly from my own experience and have been communicated to me by the Doctor and Mrs. Isbell at different times by letter and by personal narrative.

I first met them in July 1865, in San Buenaventura. Mrs. Peckham and I had journeyed from New York to that out-of-the-way-place. We found the Doctor and his wife as our host and hostess at, what was called then, the American Hotel. They greeted us very cordially . .

After I became established on the Ojai Ranch, I had frequent occasions to patronize the Doctor's hotel. In the course of one of these visits he told me he had a rifle that he loved more than anything else in the world except his wife. After a little persuasion, he brought it out. He held it up and patted it caressingly, and after a little said, addressing me, "Doctor, you have no idea how many Indians I have killed with that rifle." (4) . . .

One day I went to the Mission, determined to take a trip to Wheeler's Canyon with the purpose of getting two five gallon cans filled with oil from one of Wheeler's tanks. The Doctor listened to my request for a buggy and two horses. He said that Mrs. Isbel would like to take a ride and asked me if I had any objection to her going along. I told him no, and we soon started off. Wheeler's camp was eighteen miles from the Mission.--- While on the trip, she amused me with stories of her experiences in her California days. She said that one afternoon she was left alone by the Doctor as he had gone to buy some cattle and was, at that time, about 80 miles from home. While she was eating supper, an old Indian came into the house and told her that some men of his tribe on the American River had several pounds of gold that they would sell to the Doctor. Next morning Mrs. Isbel had her favorite horse saddled and she rode 80 miles to the Doctor's camp before sundown. On her way she swam her horse across the American River. Said I, "How in the world could you, a woman on side saddle, swim a horse across a river and keep dry?" "Well," she said, "I did it. I took my foot out of the stirrup, curled myself on the saddle, tucked in my skirts and the horse

swam over, leaving me perfectly dry." She rode the horse back again the third day. The Doctor took some old horses and made a trade with the Indians for the gold, getting 13 lbs. of clean gold dust. (5)

It was, however, during my second visit to California that Mrs. Isabel gave me many of the details of her adventurous life.— Soon after their marriage they went to Chicago, when it consisted of but little more than a Trading Station, attached to Fort Dearborn, and soon established themselves in a village a short distance outside the City where the Doctor soon acquired an extensive practice, but they both had the wandering temperament. One day the Doctor came into the house and said, "Olive, how would you like to go to California?" It was not long before the Doctor had arranged to meet the other members of the party at Des Moines, Iowa. The party soon started overland on their long journey. A short distance beyond Council Bluffs they encountered the ill-fated Donner Party, who were indulging in a frightful quarrel (6) and wasting time they should have been using to get across the mountains before winter. The Isabel party left them behind and never saw them again till the following season in California. (7) . . .

After the rainy season was over, she organized a school to keep the children busy and out of mischief. (8) She had children of white parents, no two of which came from the same place, or were of the same nationality; Spanish children of the native Spaniards of California and a few Indians. It was amusing and pathetic to hear her tell how with twenty children and three or four English books, she taught those children who spoke Spanish the English A. B. C. . . .

Very truly yours

S. F. Peckham.

One side of Dr. Isabel that has been omitted by county historians is revealed in the newspaper account at the time of his death. From the Ventura Free Press of January 8, 1886:

"Unfortunately for Dr. Isabel. when trouble came he resorted to drink to drown his sorrows. Twice in his life he was wealthy, but circumstances over which he had no control reduced him to poverty, and for some time he has been compelled to depend upon the charity of others for support. Such is life, sometimes, in the fitful and capricious world. Dr. Isabel died at Santa Paula, Tuesday."

#### NOTES

1. Mrs. Isabel apparently refers to a pension for the services rendered by Dr. Isabel at the time of the War with Mexico.
2. The spelling of the name "Isbel" is found to vary considerably. Bancroft, in his Pioneer Register, cites three different ways of spelling the name. He also incorrectly gives John as the Doctor's first name. Dr. Isabel's correct full name was Isaac Chauncey Isabel.
3. Dr. Isabel's part in the war is somewhat obscure. Bancroft does

not list him as having been an officer in Fremont's Battalion. Dr. Peckham, in another letter not printed here, says that the Doctor became ill soon after the Battalion left for southern California, and returned to the north. By April of 1847 the Doctor was operating a hotel in Monterey, the first such hostelry in that famous city. (see THE EARLY INNS OF CALIFORNIA, by Cross, pages 28 & 29.)

4. In newspaper accounts some thirty years ago, relatives of Mrs. Isbel stated that the Doctor was twice shot from his horse by Indians.
5. The story, often told, that Dr. Isbel did not hunt gold, but rather made his fortune trading with the Indians, is somewhat refuted in Carson's famous book, EARLY RECOLLECTIONS OF THE MINES, ETC. This work records that Dr. Isbel, along with John M. Murphy, was in the forefront of the early gold prospectors.
6. This statement is incorrect. The Donner Party left from Independence, Mo., and it would have been impossible for the Isbels to have passed them "a short distance beyond Council Bluffs." The trail from Independence met the one from Council Bluffs some 300 miles west of Independence. Peckham may have meant Scotts Bluff. These quarrels were commonplace among most parties crossing the plains. McGlashan, in his HISTORY OF THE DONNER PARTY, refers to such episodes as, "want of harmony."
7. If true, this statement blows up the beautiful legend that the Isbels traveled a considerable distance with the Donners. There is other evidence to substantiate the view given here by Peckham. It is surprising how many emigrants tried to "join" the Donner Party after the suffering was over. In the case of the Isbels it must be remembered that the Doctor was a close associate of John M. Murphy, and that Murphy's wife was Virginia Reed, one of the survivors of that tragedy. It is probable that with the telling of tales, the passing of the years, and the retelling of those tales, that legend in time had the Isbels traveling with the Donners.
8. Dr. Peckham has his seasons mixed. The teaching referred to here must have been at Santa Clara in the winter, not at Monterey "after the rainy season."

\* \* \* \*

The Indian who was knocked down and trampled on by an irate bull at the bull-fight last Sunday, is all right again. He should learn to either let bulls or whiskey or both alone. Ventura SIGNAL, October 4, 1879.

# Bibliography

By Chas. F. Outland

A section devoted to the interests of teachers, students, librarians, book collectors, and all others afflicted with any of the various forms of acute or chronic bibliomania.

A HISTORY OF SANTA BARBARA AND VENTURA COUNTIES, CALIFORNIA. Thompson & West Publishers, Oakland. 1883.

This is the earliest of the so called write-up or "mug" histories pertaining to Ventura County. In the past, works of this type have been looked upon with very little favor, primarily because of the numerous historical errors in them. With the passing of time, bibliographers have become more tolerant and have begun to recognize their value, particularly in regard to the great mass of biographical material they contain which is not readily available elsewhere. Numerous illustrations add to the attractiveness of the book.

The Thompson & West History cannot be classified as rare in the strictest sense of the word, but it is becoming increasingly hard to find on the shelves of the antiquarian book dealer. A copy in excellent condition is a very definite rarity. There are still a number of these books in the families of the original purchasers. The Ventura County Library and the Pioneer Museum both have copies.

NOTES ON THE GEOLOGY OF VENTURA COUNTY, CAL. by Stephen Bowers, Ph.D. Ventura, California, 1888. 14 pp.

This interesting little pamphlet was written by a rather controversial early day character. Dr. Bowers' field of interest ran all the way from geology to religious philosophy, including astronomy, ethnology, and archaeology. His intense curiosity in the latter field has not endeared him to the present day scientist. Bowers probably dug into more Indian rancheria sites, exhumed more skeletons and collected more tons of Indian artifacts than any other man in the history of the state. In so doing, he inadvertently ruined many sites that would yield more valuable information to qualified scientists today.

The work listed here contains some very interesting information, particularly in regard to the Piru mining region. Bowers lists the names of the active mines in the area at that time, their owners, types of milling equipment in use, the value of the various ores per ton, etc. The work also gives an extensive analysis of the petroleum industry as it was in 1888 in the County. A geologist presently employed by the State of California, who is thoroughly familiar with Ventura County, rates this pamphlet as reasonably accurate and good for its time.

Portions of this work were reprinted in the Storke HISTORY OF SANTA BARBARA, SAN LUIS OBISPO AND VENTURA COUNTIES in 1891, but of the original only one or two copies are known.

Dean Hobbs Blanchard Library has a photostatic copy.