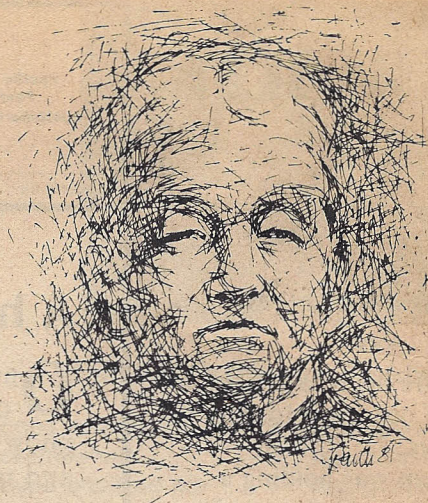


California originals

Olive Mann Isbell— The first teacher



The future looked grim for 130 or so Americans barricaded inside Mission Santa Clara de Asis. Their wagon trains had been guided there by some of Col. John C. Fremont's men. The soldiers of Don Francisco Sanchez appeared to be on the verge of attacking.

Only a handful of Americans remained at the mission; the others were fighting under Fremont against Mexico in that fall of 1846. All of them had come west in search of an Eden and been caught in a war.

In October the emigrants gained hope that they could survive a siege with the arrival of a wagon train. It included a remarkable woman—Olive Mann Isbell. Her husband, Dr. Isaac C. Isbell, was promptly drafted, along with the other able-bodied men, to accompany Fremont. The rest of the newcomers helped nurse the sick, jammed tree trunks across the big wooden gates of the compound and fortified the main building.

And Mrs. Isbell, amidst the activity and the climate of fear, saw that the 20 children at the mission needed attention and a haven. The niece of Horace Mann and a former teacher herself, she thought of the answer: a school. With help from the children and others, she cleaned up an old 15-foot square adobe stable. A rickety table and a few benches were made from the scraps of wood left in the compound.

"Before you get started, you'll have to learn how to use this," she was told as one of the men handed her a long rifle. When classes began she kept the weapon handy.

Lacking even pencils and paper, she wrote lessons on the dirt floor with a long pointed stick. From each spent fire she saved the charcoal and wrote the youngsters' A-B-Cs on the palms of their hands. Olive Mann Isbell soon

became Aunt Olive to the children, who tried to imitate her courage.

And thus began the first school in California taught by an American.

On January 1, 1847, marines from Yerba Buena (soon to be San Francisco) arrived with a small cannon and supplies. Thirty-two armed men ventured out to an adjacent mustard field in wait for the advancing horsemen of Don Francisco, who was seeking revenge for the pillage of his rancho by the *Americanos*. There was much skirmishing, but the only fatality was an American killed when his field gun blew up.

A formal treaty on January 7 ended the only war campaign in Northern California during the Mexican War.

Soon the Isbells moved to Monterey. The doctor set up his medical practice and Mrs. Isbell, now in popular demand, opened a school.

The classroom was in a large room above the jail. The initial enrollment of 25 students quickly jumped to 56. Their tuition was \$6 each for six months.

Olive Mann Isbell died in 1899 in Santa Paula where a school has been named for her. Says Audrey Youngs, who has researched her life, "Mrs. Isbell not only nurtured education in California, she exemplified the courage, persistence and zeal of the pioneer woman."

These traits were needed. And good timing helped, too. The Isbells left Springfield, Illinois for the rugged trip West in April 1846, under the leadership of wagon master Joseph Aram. Also leaving that month were two brothers who actually helped the Isbells arrange their wagon accommodations. Their names were Jacob and George Donner.

Twenty-fifth in a series of profiles of people who made an original imprint on California.

Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell was born in Ashtabula County, Ohio on Aug. 8, 1824, one of a family of 15 children, of Mr. and Mrs. Warner Mann (same stock as Horace Mann). She married Dr. Isbell at 20 and settled in Warren County, Ill. They joined Gen. Fremont's wagon train of 23 wagons which left Mt Pleasant, Iowa on the 17th of April, '46 and landed at Sutter's Fort on Oct. 1st '46, going to the Santa Clara Mission on Oct. 16th because of fear of Indians.

Mrs. Isbell opened the first school taught by an English speaking teacher in California on the Santa Clara Mission grounds in a room about 15 feet square. General Fremont had given temporary lodging to his wagon train in the Old Mission building which was previously a stable. This was called the "first American School in Calif." The seats were boxes, heat was provided by a fire built on a platform in the center with a hole cut in the roof for smoke escape, very few textbooks were available and only one pencil (according to Ferrier but not according to Mrs. Isbell). She said the children used charcoal to make their letters on the palms of their hands. The school lasted two months and included 25 pupils.

In March, 1847, Dr. and Mrs. Isbell moved to Monterey. The Dr. built the first hotel in Monterey. Messrs. Thomas O. Larkin, Milton Little, and Talbot H. Green urged Mrs. Isbell to teach a school there. A room was fitted up in the old custom house used in the Mexican regime (others say the old adobe jail). Three dollars per term was charged those who could pay. Mrs. Isbell was guaranteed \$200 per month. Rev. Walter Colton (Congregational Minister) who later laid the foundation for the first school house in California, gave her some assistance, a few books were obtained from whaling vessels and craft in the harbor. Mr. Larkin provided pencils and paper. Mrs. Isbell knew no Spanish and only the boys from the Don Jose' Abrego family (Mrs. Abrego was Josefa Estrada, half sister of Gov. Alvarado) knew any English. Twentyfive pupils began the term and fiftysix finished.

Later on Mrs. Isbell and her husband, Dr. Isaac Isbell, (Mrs. Isbell called him Dr. Chauncy Isbell) settled on a ranch near French Camp in partnership with Captain Weber of Stockton. The doctor was killed by run-away horses while on a visit to a patient in 1886. Mrs. Isbell died March 26, 1899 at Santa Paula, her home for many years. She and Dr. Isbell are both buried there.

The following is quoted from a letter written to this writer in Jan. 1952 by Mrs. Isbell's niece, Miss Mattie Mann of Concordia, Kansas. I have known Miss Mann and her mother, brother, and sisters all my life. My parents were their close friends. Mrs. Isbell visited Miss Mann's family in 1891 in Burr Oak, Kansas, where her great niece (Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell Ingersoll, now also of Concordia , Kansas) and I were born later on. Mrs. Ingersoll's mother was Mrs. Isbell's niece also and was one of my closest friends all her life. Miss Mattie Mann visited Mrs. Isbell in Santa Paula and says she spent six months there. To quote from her letter to me, - " I remember much about that visit - I was ten years old. I also remember many stories she told us of her early days in California. She told us in this first school she taught she did not have pencils, or paper, or slates, so she traced a single letter of the alphabet in the palms of the children's hands with charcoal." This statement is corroborated in a statement given by Mrs. Isbell, March 17th, 1893. (Copy of this statement is also presented to you) Miss Mann says her copy of a magazine article written and sent to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 was destroyed by a fire in her home but she has a teacher's book published in 1937 called "Reminiscences of some early California Teachers"- by Laura Esta Settle, Pres. of Calif. Retired Teacher's Assn. The Santa Paula Chronicle of March 31, 1899 published an article about Mrs. Isbell (obituary). Also an article about the Isbells was published in "The Ojai", April 3, 1895. (cont.)

(Continued)
Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell

References-

" The California Diary of Rev. Walter Colton, 1846-49".
"---On Mon. Apr. 12th- the old prison- too confined and frail-
orders given for a new one."

From- "Monterey- All of it between 2 Covers"- p. 47

" The prison was first built by Walter Colton, adjoining the old calaboose, built in 1855. A new and more substantial one was erected as the County jail, in the school house building (Colton Hall).-

P. 48- " The old calaboose was built in 1832 by Gov. Figueroa and stood at the junction of Pearl and Calif. Streets".

Since the new jail was built 1855 and Mrs. Isbell began to teach in Monterey in 1847, it had to be over the "old calaboose"-

Article in "Calif. Pioneer Schools" by M. E. Dudley says-
" First American school in California and Mrs. Isbell first teacher in Calif."

In the magazine "Land of Sunshine" Pg. 241 is Mrs. Isbell's picture

The photograph of Mrs. Isbell was given to me by her neice (Mrs. Edith Mann Johnston).

(Mrs.) Marie Hotchkiss Hall

Reference Books and Articles quoted-

" Reminiscences of Some Early California Teachers", by-
Laura Esta Settle 1937- Pres. of Retired Teachers Assn.

" Santa Paula Chronicle" March 31, 1899 / Art. by Nelle Bercaw
May 31, 1951 /

" The Ojai" April 3, 1895.

" The California Diary of Rev. Walter Colton" - 1846-49.

" Monterey - All of It between Two Covers, 1842-1930"
A. C. Jachmus.

" California Pioneer Schools" - M. E. Dudley

"Land of Sunshine" - Vols IO, II, - 1898-99 Magazine

by- Charles F. Lummis of Land of Sunshine Pub. Co. Of Los Angeles.

" Ninety Years of Education in California- 1846- 1936"

Wm. Warren Ferrier.

..Printing for Aunt Olive's 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 what came through a hole in the tile roof. This 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 J.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 from across the plains, and as superfluous baggage was not to be thought of our stock of books was very limited. I had 20 scholars.

When our soldiers were disbanded, some five or six families removed to Monterey, California where the first American Concul, Thomas O. Larken engaged me to teach a three month term. They specially fitted up a room for me over the jail. I had 56 names enrolled at \$6.00 each for the term. Part of the scholars were spanish and the other children of the emigrants.

Those were the first "American" schools in California.

I came to California first in the year 1846 and started on my return to Ohio on May first 1850. In 1857 I went to Texas to live, but left there in 1863. I went to Santa Barbara on December 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 Astabula, Astabula County, Ohio. I have been a widow since January 6th. 1886. My only support is a Mexican pension of 8.00 per month.

Olive M. Isbell

Santa Paula, California

March 17th. 1893

(Died 1899)

She does not mention that she taught the children their A.B.C's by writing the letters in the palms of their hands with charcoal. Her husband was Dr. Chauncey Isbell, and he was killed by runaway horses while he was on his way to make a call on sickness in the mountains.

(Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell Ingersoll)
Mrs. E. R. INGERSOLL

JEWELER OPTOMETRIST

133 West Sixth Street

Concordia, Kansas,

On May 1 Thomas O Larkin rented a room to Mrs Isbell for 12.50 per month.

She rented this room from May 1st to August 23, (3 months, 23 days) a total of \$47.08

His daughter Caroline was one of the pupils, as in the store account kept by Larkin of his ~~xxxxxx~~-customers, the Isabel account is given a credit as follows "By schooling of Caroline ~~xxx5.0~~ \$5.00"

It is interesting to note that on the same day hat Mrs Isabel moved out of the school room it was rented by Mrs Townsend and Miss M.Eager-August 23 1847.

In Sept 1847 Miss Eager carried on alone and continued to rent the room for a school.

This information is obtained from Larkin Account books in Bancroft library.

REMOVED FROM THE MAIN ST. PHONE 2130
HOLD OFFICE: 433 1/2 Main St. - Monterey, Calif. - Phone 3-4282
AFFILIATED WITH FIDELITY LIFE INSURANCE CO.
LIFE Insurance - Escondido
COTEL CONSTRUCTION AND TIME CO.

by Nellie Bercaw

Many persons now living in Santa Paula cherish vivid recollections of a certain bright-eyed old lady with hair of silver who spent her declining years in a modest little cottage in an unpretentious part of the town known as Ojai Street

Nestling in its setting of loquat trees, with its vine clad porch, roses and old-fashioned flowers, its gate always swung invitingly open, for Mrs Olive Mann Isbell was ever noted for her hospitality.

Mrs Isbell was born in Ashtabula, Ohio, August 8, 1824, one of a family of 15 children. She was the daughter of Mr and Mrs Warren Mann and she was always proud that she was of the stock of Horace Mann, the noted educator.

With her husband, Dr. Isaac C. Isbell, Mrs Isbell left Greenbush, Illinois, April 17, 1846 for California. They expected to join the ill-fated Donner party, but missed connections and fell in with a few other families and at Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, a party of 23 wagons was formed. They came over the "Oregon Trail" and kept together until Fort Hall was reached. Here ~~four~~ four families left to go to Oregon while the rest came on to California.

The people at Santa Clara were suffering. They were poorly housed and camp fever broke out. There were not enough well ones to care for the sick. The children were running wild, straying outside the Mission walls and getting into danger; so a room about 15 feet square that had been used as a stable, was cleaned and fitted up for a schoolroom. Some of the tiles were taken from the roof to let light in and let the smoke from the fire built on the floor in the middle of the room, out. Said smoke often drove both teacher and pupils out of doors. Here in this little room, Mrs Isbell taught the first English school in California, commencing about December 15, 1846.

Seats were boxes and a few rude benches. There was one small table at which the eighteen or twenty children took turns in writing with quill pens. Of desks there were none. The books were such as had been brought across the plains, five or six McGuffey's readers, which were passed from hand to hand; spellers were more plentiful, two or three arithmetics, the same number of geographies and three slates completed the outfit. Dr. Isbell was sick, and at recesses his wife would go to attend to his wants. This school continued two months, until in April, five of the families moved to Monterey and took their oxen to help build fortifications. Among them were Dr. and Mrs Isbell. They had been in the town about half an hour when the consul, Thomas E. Larkin and a Mr Green came to see Mrs Isbell and engaged her to teach a school for three months at six dollars a pupil for the term, the parents paying the tuition, apparently, as Mr Green attended to all details.

A room over the calaboose was fitted up for a school room. It was low with a sloping roof, so the larger pupils sat at the ends and in the middle, while the smaller ones ~~were~~ were ranged along the sides.

Benches with desks were provided and 56 pupils were in attendance, two-thirds of whom were Mexicans and spoke nothing but Spanish. About half had books, some having been left by a passing ship with the American consul who also furnished writing paper for the school.

This was the last ¹⁸teaching Mrs Isbell ever did. In the spring Dr. Isbell went out eight miles above where Stockton now is on the Calaveras. Here were three leagues of land, one-half of which was to be his, with the use of the remainder, so long as he chose, if he succeeded in making a settlement, all previous attempts having failed on account of the Indians. The ~~Mex~~ Murphys of San Jose, and Capt. Webber were his partners. The Indians were sent for and a treaty was made with them, by which they agreed not to molest the stock, and the whites agreed to furnish them with meat whenever they would make their wants known. This treaty was never broken. Dr and Mrs Isbell were settled there, in a log cabin with a puncheon floor, by the first of October 1847 and were there when gold was discovered.

Dr Isbell and Capt Webber went to the mines in April 1848 and commence trading. A large part of their trade was with the Indians to whom they sold raisins and beads pound for pound in gold.

Mrs Isbell stayed at the ranch and provided meals for men going to and from the mines. The ranch house was on the road between Stockton and Sutter's Fort, eight miles from the former and 45 miles from the latter. She said, "I made about as much as the men did at their store. Meals were \$1.00, butter \$2.00 per pound and eggs three dollars a dozen."

In May, 1850, Dr Isbell rented the ranch and went back east by steamer. He afterward sold the property and at the time of the Civil War was in Texas from which he and Mrs Isbell were compelled to flee to save their lives. They were well known loyal and out-spoken Unionists.

They escaped to Mexico, crossing that country to Mazatlan and traveled from there to San Francisco by a little schooner, being 40 days on the voyage.

After this event, Mrs Isbell's home was always in California. In 1865 or '66, she lived in the Ojai Valley for a time, later moving to Santa Paula where Dr. Isbell died in 1886.

He was at one time a surgeon in Gen. Fremont's army, and a small pension as a soldier of the Mexican War, with the freely and lovingly offered assistance of many warm friends, was Mrs. Isbell's means of support during the last years of her life.

Well did she enact her part in the development of our state and the making of its history, and towards the end she dwelt in her little house by the side of the road, happy in her wealth of varied and beautiful memories until the end which came peacefully on March 26, 1899. Her grave in the Santa Paula cemetery is marked by a marble slab, placed there through the efforts of the Current Events club in 1908. In 1940 the graduating class of Isbell school assumed care of the grave.

Her funeral was said to have been the most largely attended of any funeral ever held in Ventura County up to that time. The attendance of the school children under the direction of the county superintendent of schools was deemed a most fitting memorial to the first American teacher of California.



923 Kansas ave.,
Concordia Kansas Jan. 17,
1952.

Dear Marie:

Your nice letter received
today - nice to hear from

you.

I will say I was quite
mistaken about Bert Corris wanting
the information about Aunt Olive.
I wrote him anyway. He must
think I am crazy. I am just
as happy to send it to you.
I do not have much printed matter
any more. Our "Mamm Memorial"
and magazine article written and sent
to the Colombian Exposition 1893 - in
Chicago were destroyed by fire years
ago when our home at the farm
burned. The only thing I have now
is a Teachers book published 1937.
Called "Reminiscences of some Early
California Teachers" - in this book
one chapter carries the story of Aunt
Olive. The book is compiled by -

Laura Esta Settle - President of
California Retired Teachers Association.

Then too - if you were to write to the
newspaper - The Chronical -

Santa Paula Cal. I think you can
get much information because
they printed much of Aunt Olive's
Early History - as Santa Paula has
been here many years - she and her
husband are buried in the cemetery
there - a school is also named for
her and her picture with bronze plaque
is in this school - she also helped
to establish the first Episcopalian
Church. Her History is very colorful
and interesting reading. I will gladly
copy and send you extracts from this
book we have. Perhaps you could get
more from The Chronical.

The Santa Paula Chronical dates of
March 31, 1899 says this -

Mrs Olive Mann Schell - was born in
Ashtabula Ohio. Aug. 8, 1824. Passed away at
Santa Paula Cal. March 26, 1899. She was one
of a family of 15 children. daughter of - - -

3. Mr and Mrs Warner Mann (my grandparents)
she was of the same stock as Harace Mann
Educator.
Her husband. Dr. Schell is buried beside
her at Santa Paula. He was for a time
surgeon in Gen. Fremont's army and a
small pension as the widow of a soldier
of the Mexican war was her means of
support.

The complete history of Mrs Schell from
1847 for 10 years - is the history of
California of that period. She was quite
an old settler of the Golden West when
she 49 was came."

now from another writer in "The Ajai",
April 13, 1895. same book.

----- It was feared they would be
attacked. Fremont was ordered to take the
people to Santa Clara where they were
housed inside Mission buildings. The
San Joaquin river was flooded near where
Doak's Ferry now is. Oct. 16 1846. They
arrived safely at Santa Clara Mission
they had been six months on the way -

The children running wild outside the mission walls — so a room about 15 ft sq. that had been used for a stable — was cleaned and fitted up for a school room. Some of the tiles were taken off the roof to let the light in and the smoke out. Fire built in middle of the room on earthen floor. Here in this little room Mrs. Schell taught the first English school in California. Commencing about the 15th of Sept. 1846. — seats were boxes and a few rude benches. a small table at which 18 or 20 children took turns writing with quill pens. The books had been brought across the plains: 5 or 6 Mc Huffs' readers — spellers were plentiful 2 or 3 arithmetics. some number geography three slates completed the outfit. In April 5 families moved to Monterey. Among them were Dr. & Mrs. Schell. Mrs. Schell was hired a school of ~~six~~ months at \$6.00 per pupil. — a room over the calaboose was fitted up for a school. — Walter Colton — the first alcalde of Monterey — also gave assistance in teaching. These primitive arrangements may be called the beginning of the public school system of California.

5-My writing is very poor
on this and is not far
the record - but if you
want a copy - I really
can do it.

I called Sagersall house
wrote to get the news
about the folks whom would
be come. They came in
this afternoon - it is always
so nice when they are home
Olive answered the phone.
The radio weather today says
California is getting lots of
rain! Our weather is very
fine these days.

I hope the weather is good
when it comes time for
us to move to our new
home - St. Ann's. The sisters
tell us it may be this month.
We have been waiting almost
a year. A year tomorrow
since I sustained my last
fall.

2. I am feeling fine
but do not walk very
well but can get around.
That means so much.

I would like. I have a
great deal of company and
I have lovely friends. They
all do such nice things for
me. Olive and Earl are very
good to me. I could not get
along without them. They are
grand people.

Going back to Aunt Olive -
she was my father's half
sister. she being of the first
family and my father his
sister and a brother. being of the
second family. Both families
having the same grandfather.
Aunt Olive spent several
months in our home in
Burr Oak before my father
died - after his death in
1891-1892 my older sister Hattie
took me to Santa Paula
with her. We spent six
months with Aunt Olive in
her home - she was a widow

Oh yes - I remember much
about that visit - I was ten
years old. I also remember
many stories she told us of
our early days in California.
She told us in this first
school she taught - she did
not have pencils and paper or
slates so she traced a
single letter of the alphabet
in the palms of the
children's hands with -
Charcoal!

My dear - This is quite long
enough for this time.

Let me know the out-
come of your research.

If I can help you - Alice
will be glad to type some
extracts of what we have.
Write again

Love

Mattie M.

(Mattie Mann)

M. Myams
923 Kansas -
Concordia Kan.



Mrs. Reese A. Hall
Mrs. M. H. Hall
5-36 ^{airc. Stephens} Alameda Drive
Los Altos California

Santa Paula, Calif.

May 27, 1952.

Mrs. R. A. Hall,

536 Arboledas Dr.,

Los Altos,

California.

My dear Mrs. Hall:-

The publisher of the Santa Paula Chronicle turned your letter over to me, since some years ago I delved into the history of Olive Mann Isabel among her acquaintances here and wrote a paper about her for the Santa Paula Ebell club.

I am sending you under separate cover a copy of the Santa Paula Chronicle dated

May 31st., 1931 which contains a story written by me in 1923. It is on page 5.

You may send it back after you have copied the article, if you like, as there are few copies of the paper available.

I hope this will help settle the question about the jail.

We have a public school here named after Mrs. Isbell, and years ago a little Current Events club raised enough money to put a rather peculiar and interesting stone at her grave in our local cemetery.

Yours sincerely

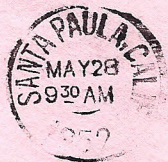
(Mrs.) Nellie Bercau.
324 N. Mill St., Santa Paula.

P. S. Mrs. Isbell was still living when I came to Santa Paula from Ohio in 1897, but I never saw her.

However I am one of the rather few persons, I think who can take you to her home which has been changed by additions and subtractions.

We have three Pressey men who lived near her in their childhood and used to enjoy her bathtub. They had none in their own home yet they were at that time. They let the water run over and leak down through the ceiling one time!

324 N. Mill St.,
Santa Paula,
California.



Mrs. R. A. Hall,
536 Arboleda Drive,
Los Altos,
California.