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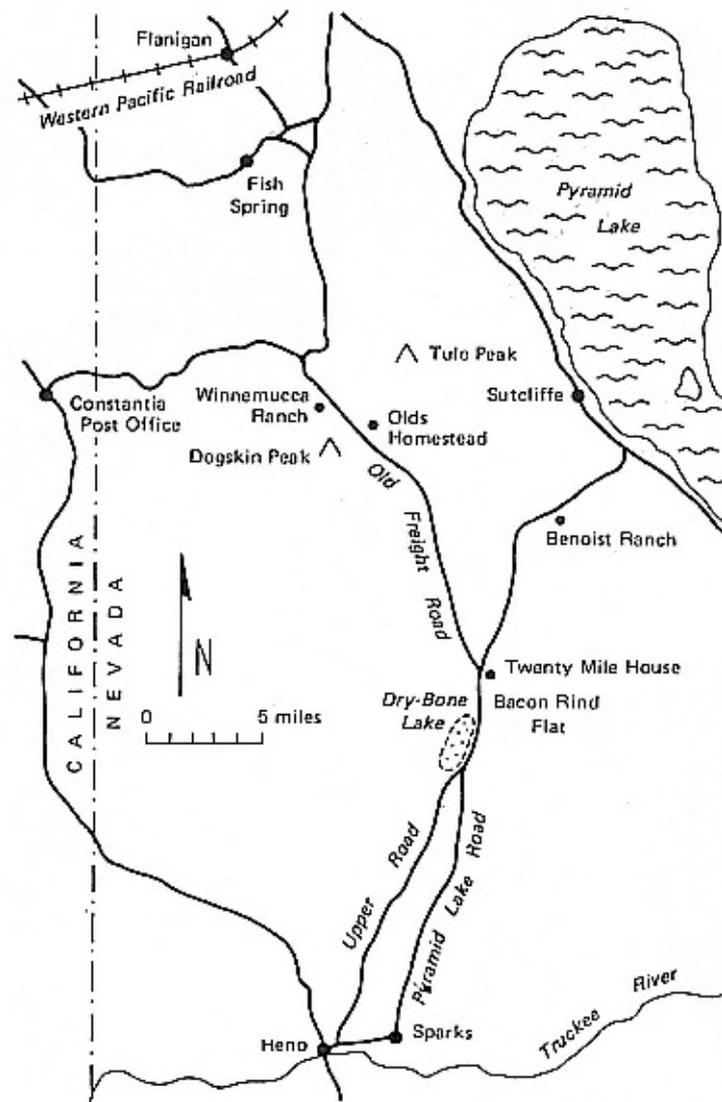
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Twenty Miles from a Match



Twenty Miles from a Match
Homesteading in Western Nevada

Sarah E. Olds

Foreword by Leslie Zurfluh



UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA PRESS
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The descendants of Sarah Olds would like to thank Louis Beaupre, Don Prusso, John Raker, and Kenneth Carpenter for their help in bringing the present memoirs to the attention of the University of Nevada Press.

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Foreword

The buildings are gone now, burned in the brush fires of the 1970s, and the pastures of the homestead have been absorbed by the neighboring ranch. The driving spirit of the place had moved on before that, so it was just another deserted place by then. Sarah E. Olds had gone on to other interests and finally at 88 to her well-earned rest, having attained her goals of educating her six children without help from outside, and incidentally enjoying life immensely in the process.

Sarah Elizabeth Thompson was born in Iowa in 1875, the youngest daughter of a family of nine. Her father, Alexander Thompson, had migrated from Scotland to Canada, where he met and married Mary Anne Harper, a recent migrant from Ireland; they soon moved to Iowa, settling on a farm near Ottumwa. The Thompsons' large family was spread over many years, so by the time Sarah was a young lady her older brothers and sisters were out on their own. A brother, Dave, was attracted to the mining booms of the far west, and though he returned to Iowa, his stories of his adventures prodded several members of the family to move. An older sister, Nettie, committed the shameful act of divorcing her husband, and went west to avoid the criticism directed at herself and her family. Meanwhile, Sarah had

studied dressmaking the only acceptable occupation for young ladies in the Bible Belt at the time.

Late in the 1890s Sarah's parents became ill, and as the youngest daughter, she stayed home to care for them until their deaths. By 1897 Sarah was free and 21 years old. Sister Nettie, the disgraced one, was living in Modesto, California, so in spite of dire warnings by the family members still in Iowa, and the disappointment of several "neighbor boys," Sarah departed for California. Nettie had made her own way by cooking and housekeeping, so she knew the mining camps of the southern Mother Lode were excellent pickings for anyone who could cook or sew. Sarah therefore set out for Sonora, an active mining camp, riding in a rockaway stage. After investigating work possibilities in Sonora, she found the best prospects were in the smaller camps near Sonora Jamestown, Columbia, Stent. She chose Stent, eight miles southwest of Sonora, where she met A. J. Olds, a prospector and miner.

Albert J. Olds known as A.J. was a member of a quite distinguished California family. His grandfather had come to Marin County in 1854 and bought 8,000 acres of land at Olema "for \$4,000 gold coin." A.J.'s father had been a member of the Constitutional Convention for California, but A.J. and his brother were both bitten by the gold bug, and both drifted from one strike to another till their health failed. Today we know the disease as silicosis, but then it was the lethal "Miner's Con" that filled graveyards or wrecked health in camps from Bisbee to Virginia City. A record of the births of the Olds children is a record of the various mining discoveries of the period. Edson, the eldest, was born in Confidence, near Sonora,

California; Jessie in Bisbee, Arizona; Alice in Virginia City, Nevada. By then A.J.'s health had deteriorated so that he could no longer work underground, so the last three children, Leslie, Albert, and Martha, were born in Reno, where the family settled in 1906 (the last one after the homestead was established).

The homestead in 1910 must have been a discouraging sight. There were three rooms in a house of board-and-batten, with a shed roof. Sagebrush grew to the doorstep, and horses and cattle slept next to the house for lack of fences. There was a natural grass pasture, and much open range. The nearest neighboring ranches were owned by absentee ranchers and operated by hired hands, so our nearest family was twelve miles away, a Mexican family whose children were about the same age as Mom Olds's. All the children learned to ride at an early age, often bareback for want of a saddle, and usually on a mustang that could be had for the breaking.

The homestead was reached from Reno by following the Pyramid Lake road to the Twenty Mile House, then taking the old freight road which ran north toward Fish Springs and on into Oregon. Fifteen miles along this road is a small valley, containing two big ranches, and off to the east, the homestead. Tule Mountain rises east of the place, with wide natural meadows and springs in the high mountain, while Dogskin Mountain, steep and barren, looms to the west. A narrow, rocky canyon connects the valley to Warm Springs (now Palomino Valley) while to the north are two high passes over the mountains, usually snowed closed in winter.

By 1926 all the Olds childrenor "homestead kids" as we were sometimes calledwere away from the

homestead, at school or married, so Sarah, by then known as Mom Olds to the ranchers and cowboys, launched on a new career. At Pyramid Lake was a fishing camp called Sutcliffe, or The Willows, one of the few privately deeded lands on the Paiute Reservation. The resort consisted of a motley array of tent houses and shacks, but was very popular with sportsmen. Maggie Sutcliffe had died, and her husband Uncle Jim had no way to operate the resort, so Mom Olds leased the property for a year and then bought it in 1927. She and A.J. were excellent hosts Mom tending to the practical things, and A.J. entertaining guests with stories of the mines and early days. It was here that Mom wrote the bulk of her reminiscences about homesteading. Together they had the main building replaced and then the tents disappeared, so Sutcliffe became a thriving resort. The only hired help were Indian women for laundry and dishwashing, as the three younger children were home during vacations, the busiest time. We girls really worked those summers but had fun too. Many times we would go to dances in Fernley or Flannigan both about twenty miles away and return just in time for a dip in the lake before serving breakfast to the fishermen.

In 1927 the state legislature changed Nevada's residency requirement (for divorce) from six months to three months, and divorcees from the Eastern states began crowding into Reno. There were only two main hotels then, the Golden and the Riverside, so the lawyers began placing clients out of town. Almost overnight several dude ranches started, and Sutcliffe became a dude ranch as well as a fishing resort. Other dude ranches near Pyramid were the Monte Cristo

and the TH, followed by ranches in the Truckee Meadows and Franktown. Much to our disgust, we girls were delegated to take our "dudes" riding into the mountains sometimes with hilarious results. One woman, on coming to a very steep place on a trail, declared in elegant Bostonian "I'm not going to ride down that Goddam precipice!" and it took an hour of persuasion to induce her to even walk down it, with us leading her horse ahead.

By 1928 A.J.'s health failed to the extent that he was bedfast most of the time, and one more daughter was married, leaving Mom less help in running the resort. In 1931 she sold it and moved to Reno, where A.J. died the same year.

By then Nevada was feeling the results of the Great Depression, so Mom Olds was able to buy part of the Waltz Ranch south of Reno, near what is now Virginia Lake. Here she planned to establish another dude ranch, but the "Winter of the Big Hungry" was upon her. The Wingfield Banks in Reno closed their doors, many businesses failed, and Mom's popularity became a debit, not an asset. The big Waltz house filled with unemployed cowboys and people out of work, rather than paying guests, and Mom hadn't the heart to refuse food and shelter. She leased the big house to a more hard-hearted couple, and built a small house across Lakeside Drive, where the Lakeside Plaza Shopping Center now stands. Here she lived most of the time, taking an occasional paying guest, traveling, and revising her reminiscences about life as a homesteader. Her travels took her to Alaska, Hawaii, Mexico, and, when she was 85, to Florida and New York. She remained alert and energetic to the end of her life in 1963. She was active

in the Unity Church, and even went on national television to tell how she got her six children educated. The week before her death, she won a local cribbage tournament, and bridge was a constant interest.

Mom Olds' children did not fail her by accepting "outside help." Her efforts to educate them may have cost Nevada, but the cost was amply repaid over the years. The boys balked at college, but the four girls worked and got their Normal School certificates. Each taught school a year or two before marrying. From the 1920s to the start of World War II it was a crime for a female teacher to marry, so all stopped teaching and raised their families. Jessie was the first to return to teaching in rural schools, but by 1942 all four were back at work, and all finished University after the time out for families. In all, the Olds girls returned over 120 years of teaching for their initial cost of education. Edson, the trapper, continued in that line, with time out for service in the Seabees during World War II. He became an excellent judge of furs, and at the time of his death was affiliated with a large New York firm of furriers, the only Gentile in a company of Jewish businessmen. He was on a fur-buying trip in the hinterlands when he suffered a fatal heart attack at 72.

Albert was just out of high school when the Depression hit. He worked at various jobs in farming and mining, and finally found his niche as a gyppo logger in Quincy, California, where he now lives in very active retirement.

Alice was teaching in Henderson, Nevada, when she and her husband were killed in a head-on car crash. The other three girls are now retired, living in various parts of the state. Each produced from two to

four children, all energetic, none on welfare Mom's greatest dread. Not a bad record for a bunch of homesteaders' kids and a woman who started from scratch.

LESLIE OLDS ZURFLUH
FERNLEY, NEVADA APRIL 1978

One

Biff, bang, bing went the snowballs against the side of my apartment at five A.M. We were having an unprecedented snow storm in the foothills of Tuolumne County, California. I was a young girl twenty-three years old, a tenderfoot or greenhorn, right out from Iowa. It was 1898, my first winter in California. I was operating a dressmaking shop in the little mining camp of Stent near Sonora. When the storm blew up the boys of the camp had promised me a good, old-fashioned face washing to remind me of home. They were true to their word, for here they were already throwing snowballs and threatening to break in if I didn't come out and play snowballs with them.

There were two girls living next door to me in a little home boarding house, the type of which there are always so many in any mining camp. They had promised to help me out in the fight. When they heard the fun begin, out they came. It was we three girls against a pack of rowdy boys. There were two inches of new, wet snow, which soon became mixed with red clay. What fun we had! We played and hollered till the snow melted and we all got wet, muddy, and tired.

The camp boasted of a few dug wells, our only water supply, one of which was next door to me in

front of the boarding house. After our snow battle I crossed over to the well for a bucket of water to clean myself and my apartment, which had been tracked with red clay inside and out. While I was drawing the water, a man came out of the boarding house rubbing his eyes, and hardly looking at me he said, "Why in hell don't you get down in the back yard or some back alley if you're going to yell around here like a pack of Piutes?"

As I was the only human in sight, his remarks were addressed to me. Thus were the first words spoken to me by the man who was to become my husband a few short months later. I had seen him going to and from the boarding house for months, and I knew his name was Mr. Olds, but until now we had never spoken.

I knew who he was, for he and I had helped substantially in supporting a lady and two children a few months before. Our charitable work came about in this way. Mr. Olds had a friend, a big Scotchman by the name of Herb McNeal, who was jovial when sober, but quarrelsome when drunk.

One night Herb got on a drinking spree, had a fight, and was shot twice through the hip. Mr. Olds hired a livery conveyance and with the help of another man got Herb to the hospital in Sonora, eight miles away. Next morning when he got home he went down to see how Mrs. McNeal and the two children were going to live while Herb was out of work.

He found them with no means of support. He had given her ten dollars with the promise of more when that was gone. This is where I came into the picture. A little boy came into the shop one day, stood looking straight at me for a moment, then exclaimed, "Miss Thompson, you have beautiful teeth."

I smiled and said, "Thank you, little fellow, thank you. Whose little boy are you, and what is your name?"

"I'm Bobby McNeal, and my daddy's in the hospital. I have a little cocker spaniel puppy with a long tail. Daddy said we'd have to find somebody with good teeth to bite the puppy's tail off. You have such good teeth, won't you please come home with me and bite off my puppy's tail?"

The little boy looked so earnest that I didn't dare laugh at him. I knew he was the son of the man who had been shot. "I would like to come home with you and see your puppy, but I won't promise to bite off his tail." I was curious to know what had prompted such a queer request, and also anxious to see how Mrs. McNeal was getting along without a payday, for I knew miners well enough to know that one payday barely reached the next.

Mrs. McNeal told me that her husband thought it much better to bite a puppy's tail off than to cut it off, and had jokingly remarked, "Miss Thompson, the dressmaker, has such beautiful teeth we should ask her to come down and do it." After Herb went to the hospital, Bobby became the man of the family and took it upon himself to see that the puppy's tail was properly taken care of.

I found the family in need of help so told Mrs. McNeal that I was a dressmaker and batching and didn't have much time to cook. I suggested that I would furnish the food for all of us for the evening meal, if she would cook it. It would be a favor to me, if I could come down and eat with them. In that way Mr. Olds and I had kept the McNeal family for almost two months until Herb was able to go back to work.

Although I had never met Mr. Olds, I had often

heard Mrs. McNeal tell what a wonderful man he was. At the time of our first encounter, he was trying to work nights at the mine and sleep in the daytime, and we in our hilarious fun had disturbed his rest.

"Oh, Mr. Olds," I said, "I'm very sorry we disturbed you."

"It's too late to be sorry now," he snapped. "There's no apologies accepted." He turned abruptly and went back into the house, leaving me thinking he was the darndest old crank I'd ever met.

I told everyone what I thought of him, wanting them to share in my opinion. Perhaps I was a little egotistical and stuck on myself, for I was used to hearing compliments rather than a tirade like this. The world in general had gone wrong with Mr. Olds that morning, and after his rude awakening he went down to the mine office, drew his time, and left town.

We didn't see him again for some time. I felt so bitter about him I really hoped he would never return. Not so with the boarding house girls. They said he was "awful good pay" and they hated to lose him.

In the meantime I was very much interested in a dashing young Irishman named Murphy, who was foreman of one of the mines. He had a wonderful baritone voice, and I realize now that it was the voice and not the man that I thought I was in love with. We were keeping steady company, as we called it in the gay nineties.

Mr. Murphy was very methodical in his courting. He called on me every Sunday and Wednesday evening promptly at seven P.M. Our chief enjoyment was going to concerts where he had engagements to sing. I would sit enraptured while listening to his melodious voice. The first song I heard him sing was "Es-

thore," meaning "darling" in Gaelic. I would imagine he was singing it to me. I still remember two lines that went like this:

The waves are still singing to the shore,
While I'm thinking of you, Esthore.

One afternoon while I was sitting on my porch sewing, I looked up and saw the most handsomely dressed gentleman walking my way. He wore a tailor-made suit and a derby hat, which was the fashion in those days. He stopped, tipped his hat, and said, "Good evening, Miss Thompson. I came over to apologize rather belatedly for my rudeness in speaking to you the way I did the morning of your snow battle."

It was then I recognized the well-dressed gentleman as Mr. Olds, the "old crank," the "detestable person" about whom I had made such unfavorable remarks. He was now a handsome young knight with a pleasant smile, and a very pleasing personality. But I could not resist the cutting remark, "It's too late to be sorry. No apologies accepted."

The apologies were accepted by both of us, for he came up on the porch and sat down for a friendly visit which lasted for hours. It was the beginning of a strange courtship that held never a word of love or affection, but a very real companionship. He called me either "Sister" or "old lady" from the beginning, which pleased me, for I thought it more interesting than the endearing terms the other young men used. I called him A.J. from the first, and so it was A.J. and old lady (till we were married and the babies came, when he became Daddy to all of us).

A.J. liked to hunt and fish. He would come by my shop after coming off shift at the mine and say,

"Come on, old lady, let's take to the hills." I would neglect my work, and we would go for a glorious tramp, either hunting or fishing along the Tuolumne River.

One day while fishing, we found an old raft tied up to a stump. Some children had made it and anchored it there. It was rather a crude affair just two big logs with boards nailed on top. We thought it would be fun to row the raft out in the middle of the river where the water was deep so A.J. could fly-cast from it.

It was great fun. A.J. finally caught his fish, but in the excitement of reeling it in he stepped too close to the edge of the raft, dumping both of us into the water. I had learned to swim bare-naked as a child, but we never knew what a bathing suit was. This was a different proposition. Swimming now in the swift-moving current with all my clothes on was quite a struggle. I was fully dressed in the costume of the gay nineties high-topped button shoes, black lisle stockings, two full, ruffled petticoats, and an ankle-length dress. It was topped off with a wide-brimmed sailor hat fastened on with two ten-inch hatpins stuck in from opposite sides of the crown. It would have been an acrobatic feat to remove my hat. I laboriously swam in all my cumbersome attire through the fast-flowing stream. Fortunately I had only a few strokes to swim till I reached shallow water and waded ashore.

I think A.J. must have glanced my way and seen that I was making it all right, for he kept right on with his fish. Soon he followed me to shore with both fish and raft. After depositing his hard-won fish on the bank, he came over and gave me a rousing smack on