

Mary Hallock Foote, Writer and Illustrator (1847–1938)

By Edna E. Kimbro

Two weeks after her marriage in 1876, Mary Hallock Foote reluctantly journeyed west with her new husband. It was with great difficulty that she left her closeknit Quaker family, sophisticated friends, and budding career as an illustrator. In her later memoirs she wrote, "No girl ever wanted less to 'go West' with any man, or paid a man a greater compliment by doing so."

The newlyweds settled at the New Almaden quicksilver mine in Santa Clara County; Arthur resumed his work as a mining engineer, while Mary began a series of drawings and articles about her new environment, to submit to the Eastern press. This work met with immediate success and from the mid-1870s to World War I, Mary Hallock Foote was one of the best-known writers and illustrators in the nation because of her insightful portrayals of the Far West.

In 1877, seeking a more pleasant environment in which to raise their newborn son, the Footes moved to Santa Cruz at the suggestion of Georgiana Bruce Kirby. While Arthur concentrated on developing a process to make Portland cement from local limestone, Mary recorded her impressions of the community, both in writing and artistically. She observed the few remaining remnants of the community's Hispanic past, and contrasted them with the sober New England air of moral rectitude the town had by then assumed. Her observations were published as "A Sea-Port on the Pacific" in *Scribner's Monthly*, August 1878. They are worthy of perusal today, providing clear insights into our community as it was (and in some ways may still be).

Following their time in Santa Cruz, the Footes moved to a succession of mining communities, in which Mary continued to record both the daily flavor and extraordinary events that shaped her life. For a time in the late 1880s, she was the sole source of support for the family, when Arthur's current project foundered, and he slipped into depression and drinking.

Finally, a stable position with the North Star gold mine in Grass Valley gave the Footes the security that had eluded them earlier in life. There, Mary set down her reminiscences, recently published as *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*. With grace and honesty, these memoirs give a compelling personal account of the happiness and anxiety, accomplishments and failures that were experienced by this accomplished woman and devoted pioneer wife.

Sources

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- *The autobiography of Mary Hallock Foote is available at the Library: A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West; the reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote. San Marino, CA., Huntington Library, 1972.*

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