

OVERLAND TALES

One of the West's most celebrated woman writers during the late-19th and early-20th centuries—Josephine Clifford McCrackin—called Santa Cruz home

By Geoffrey Dunn

In the spring of 1885, a lengthy feature story appeared in the popular journal "Pacific Rural Press" that focused on farm life in the largely unpopulated summit region of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Highlighted in the article was a prominent couple, Jackson and Josephine (Clifford) McCrackin, who were raising fruit on a 26-acre ranch, called Monte Paraiso (or Mountain Paradise), located three miles southeast of Wrights Station, an important stop on the old narrow-gauge South Pacific Coast Railroad.

(Above) An early photo of California environmentalist, writer, and journalist Josephine McCrackin.

The article provided an in-depth discussion of the fruits being harvested by the McCrackins, and also included detailed biographical sketches of each. Jackson McCrackin, it was noted, had made significant amounts of money in an Arizona silver mine a decade earlier. In 1882, he had married the widow, Josephine Clifford, who the article rightly assessed, was "well known to men of letters and to the reading public as an authoress of rare merit, first known to California as a contributor to Bret Harte's 'Overland Monthly' in a series of 'Sketches of Travel' in Arizona. She afterward wrote for the 'Californian' as long as that able periodical was published."

"Overland Monthly" and the "Californian" were two of the most important Western journals in the late 1800s, and Clifford McCrackin had been a stalwart at each. She counted among her colleagues and contemporaries, in addition to Harte, the likes of Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Ina Coolbrith, Joaquin Miller, Jack London, George Sterling and John Muir. "She has written for various other papers in the country," the article added, hinting at a list that included national publications such as 'Harper Brothers.' "A volume of her 'Overland Tales' was published in 1877."

The author was in her mid-forties when the article appeared, and her writing career—not to mention her rich and colorful life—had barely reached its midway point.

Not able to refrain from the traditional way that women—and women writers—were depicted in the 19th-century press, the article concluded by adding to McCrackin a feminine touch, declaring that she "is a great lover of flowers and their cultivation, and has growing around her door, in the yard, at the corners of the house and in various places, in picturesque groups, many beautiful, blooming shrubs and plants."

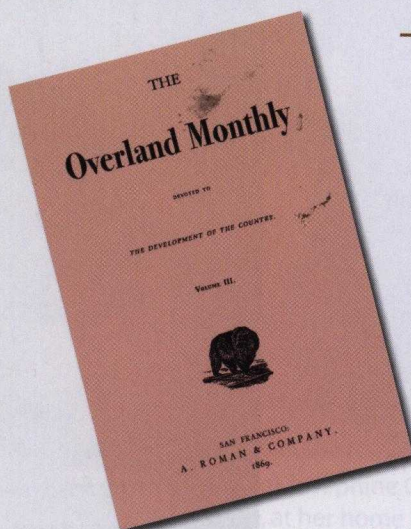
But she was much more than a lover of flowers. Much more.

Born Josephine Woempner in the Peter-shagen Castle, in Prussia, during the fall of 1838, she came from a noble bloodline. Her father had fought at Waterloo directly under Wellington and, because of his "conspicuous bravery" in that famous battle, had been named a lieutenant in the British Army; her mother had been raised among Prussian royalty and had been educated to serve as a maid of honor to Princess Marie Sophie Frederikke of Hesse-Kassel, the queen consort of Denmark and Norway.

The advent of revolution in Europe during the 1840s hurled Prussia and the rest of the continent into political turmoil, so the Woempners escaped in 1846, immigrating to the United States and eventually settling in St. Louis, home to a large German community. Eight-year-old Josephine attended a private



(Above) Josephine Clifford McCrackin at the left of photographer Andrew P. Hill (center), founder of the Sempervirens Club, sits with early club members at the base of the Big Basin's Father of the Forest redwood.



(Above) McCrackin's first article for *Overland Journal*, "Down Among the Dead Leaves", was published in 1869.

Prussian school before enrolling at the Externat of Sacred Heart Catholic Convent.

In 1864, during the final days of the Civil War, Josephine, who had tended to wounded soldiers during the war, married a lieutenant in the Union Army, James A. Clifford, then stationed in Pennsylvania. As it turned out, he was not who he appeared to be. Clifford later told his wife that while he was a civilian, he had killed a man in Texas in "self-defense," though local authorities had threatened to charge him with murder and hang him for his crime. He escaped, changed his identity, and got lost in the violent madness of the war.

Relocated to Fort Bayard, Arizona, Josephine's husband eventually revealed his complicated past. Gradually driven to a raging insanity by paranoia, Clifford came



(Above) In 1880, McCrackin purchased 26 acres land in the Santa Cruz Mountains and built a home in the community of Summit, California.

to believe that his wife would eventually betray him and tell the Army about his deed. He terrorized her, she would later recall, standing over her at night with a hatchet in hand, threatening to cut off her head. At other times he held a revolver against her temple, or a knife against her throat, promising to kill her if she ever spoke and to throw her body parts into a fire. She, too, was driven to the brink of insanity.

Josephine eventually liberated herself in a wooden, horse-drawn Army ambulance through the Arizona and New Mexico desert, soon moving San Francisco, where she reconnected with her mother and siblings, who had relocated to California during the war. She never heard from her husband again—though she admittedly remained weary of strangers.

In San Francisco, Josephine Clifford (she kept the last name of her crazed husband) forged an entirely new life. She taught German at the South Cosmopolitan School in the city, and quickly initiated her career in journalism.

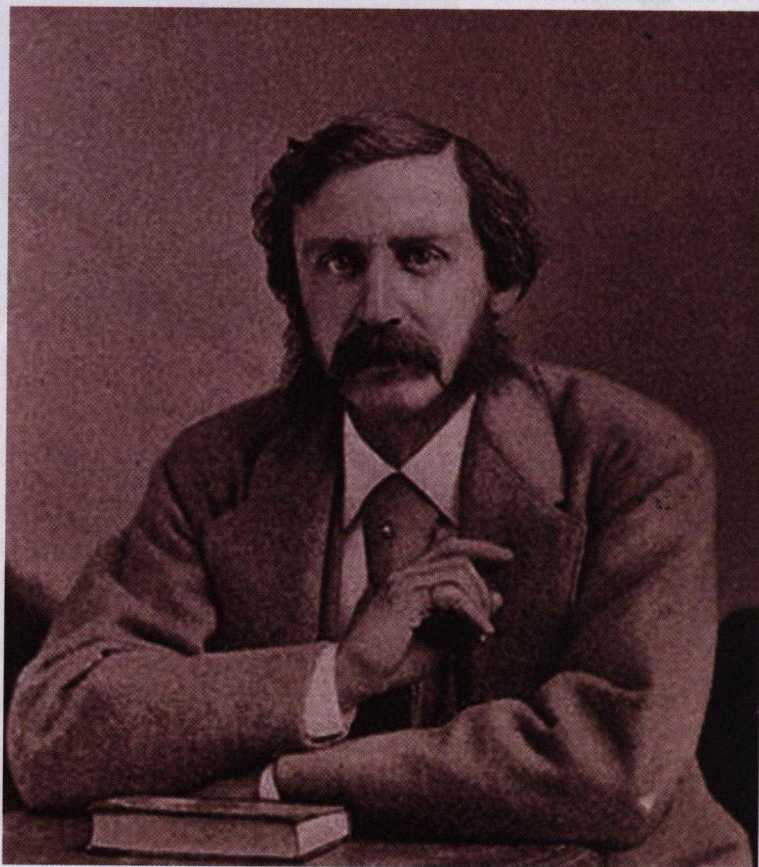
Her first major breakthrough as a writer came in 1869, when Harte's "Overland Monthly," then published in San Francisco, accepted her story "Down Among the Dead Letters," a delightful account of her visit to the office of the U.S. Postal System's unclaimed correspondence in Washington, D.C. She was now part of the "Overland" writing stable that included the biggest names in literature west of the Mississippi. In 1877 her popular collection of stories, "Overland Tales," was published by A. Roman & Co., out of San Francisco.

The following decade—then living in Salinas—she met Jackson McCrackin (the name is sometimes incorrectly spelled McCracken), who, in addition to his success in silver mining had served in the first Arizona legislature. They

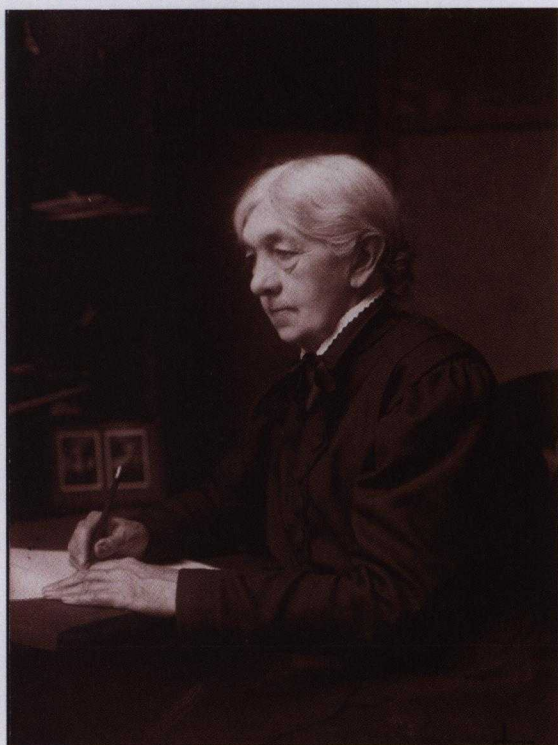
married in Monterey County in 1882, and then settled in the rural paradise of the Santa Cruz Mountains. She continued to write, and in 1893 published her second collection of her work, "Another Juanita and Other Stories."

During the hot autumn of 1899, disaster struck. A raging fire destroyed the McCrackin ranch and, more importantly to McCrackin, large stands of majestic redwood trees—*Sequoia sempervirens*—throughout the summit region. The following year, McCrackin issued an impassioned letter for the saving of the redwoods in the pages of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*—leading to her efforts, along with photographer Andrew P. Hill and many others, to form the Sempervirens Club and to establish, in 1902, what became Big Basin Redwoods State Park, the first such park in California.

Following the death of her husband in 1904, McCrackin relocated to Santa Cruz. She earned a meager living as a special feature writer for the *Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel*, writing delightful stories about social events and architecture, along with perceptive cultural profiles. She continued her efforts to protect wildlife, forming the Ladies Forest and Songbird Protection Association. She was also a founding member of the Women's Pacific Coast Press Association.



Bret Harte publisher of the *Overland Journal* is best remembered for his stories featuring the romantic figures of the California Gold Rush.



(Above) Continuing her writing into 80s, McCrackin was often found at her writing desk.

In 1909, the community held several fund-raising events to facilitate the building of a home for her on a lot on Pacheco Avenue, donated by the Laveaga Realty Company; construction materials were donated by various local lumber companies and hardware stores. She named her completed home "Gedenkheim," which she had proudly painted red. In 1913, she published her third collection of stories, "The Woman Who Lost Him," which included an introduction by Bierce and "a romantic history" of McCrackin's life by George Wharton James.

In December of 1916, the author (who her friends referred to simply as "Jo"), was honored with a special day dedicated to her life at the Panama-California International Exposition in San Diego. "And thus will transpire one of the grand sunset days in a life devoted to the interests of California and her people," the San Francisco Examiner noted, "an event long to be remembered, one whose personal and aggregate attentions will assuredly suffice to make a heart sing with the understood sense of eternal love among humankind... California is as much indebted to Josephine Clifford McCrackin as to any other of her great citizens."

She died in 1920 and was buried with her family in Salinas. According to John Chase's "Santa Cruz Architecture," her will specified that her home be left as a group residence "for elderly single women who were homeless."

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(Above) Josephine Clifford McCrackin with her dog, Little Dickie, at her home in Santa Cruz..