

A Howling Wilderness: Josephine Clifford McCrackin

By Stephen Payne

In October and November 1880 a writer, Josephine Wompner Clifford, purchased a total of twenty-six acres for \$504 from Lyman Burrell and started building a ranch house and buildings. She was one of the few single women living in the mountain region. Josephine Clifford earned her living by writing articles and short stories for some of the best magazines and newspapers in the United States, including the *Overland Monthly*, which published a large amount of her articles. For the next quarter century, she lived and wrote at her ranch that she named "Monte Paraiso" (Mountain Paradise). Along with publications in prestigious magazines of the day, she wrote for the *Mountain Echoes*, the Summit Literary Club's journal, and was a friend of many of the early settlers in the area. She was responsible for introducing many of the literary giants of the late 1800's to the Santa Cruz Mountains: Bret Harte, Ambrose Bierce, Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain, Herman Scheffauer, and others.

Josephine Wompner was born on November 25, 1838, in the Petershagen Castle, on the Weser River, Prussia. Her father, Ernest Wompner, was from Hanover. When he was eighteen he fought at Waterloo and was made a lieutenant in the British Army for bravery. Josephine's mother, Charlotte Wompner, was a daughter of the Hessian family of Ende von Wolfsprung and was educated to become a maid of honor to Princess Maria of Hesse-Kassel.

During the late 1840s the German states were in constant turmoil, resulting in the 1848 revolution. Josephine's father, a Prussian civil servant, was aware of the impending troubles and in 1846, two years before the revolution, took his family to the United States, settling in St. Louis, Missouri.

In St. Louis, Josephine entered a private German school and later the Externat of Sacred Heart Convent School. In 1854 her father died, leaving her mother, a sister, and Josephine alone. Her brother, George, had gone to the gold fields of California during the Gold Rush.

Ten years later, in 1864, Josephine met and married Lieutenant James A. Clifford in St. Louis. Lt. Clifford, a member of the I Third Cavalry, United States Army, and Josephine were stationed at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. At the end of



Undated photo of Josephine McCrackin with Zasu Pitts. Courtesy of the History Archives, Museum of Art and History at the McPherson Center.

the Civil War, Lt. Clifford was transferred to Fort Union, New Mexico. In an article, "Marching with a Command," Josephine Clifford wrote the story of the long march from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas to Fort Union, under the command of General Sykes. The entire command consisted of eight hundred foot soldiers, two hundred army wagons, a dozen or two carriages, fourteen hundred mules, and horses for officers. "No wonder the grass never grew again where General Sykes' commands had passed!" she wrote.

Upon their arrival at Fort Union, Lt. Clifford's group was sent on to Fort Bayard, [New Mexico], where the two Cliffords were housed in a large tent, complete with two servants. It was during this period in the desert that problems erupted between the Cliffords.

One day Lt. Clifford told Josephine that when he was a civilian in Texas, before the Civil War, he had killed a man in self-defense, but, the lawmen of Texas viewed the fight as homicide and vowed to hang him. In desperation he changed his name and personality and joined the army, completely throwing the lawmen off his trail. After this revelation to his wife, Lt. Clifford, began feeling that Josephine would betray him and he would be hung by his old enemies.

Driven insane by his paranoia he began to terrorize his wife at night. She would often awaken to find him standing over her with a hatchet ready to cut her head off, or, he would tie her up in bed and hold his empty service revolver at her temple, squeezing the trigger several times while telling her that if she talked about his past he would kill her, cut her body into bits and roast them in the fire. Needless to say the effects of this treatment began to tell on her. She was driven almost insane.

After arranging for an escort with the Commander of the fort and being assured that he would have a guard placed over Lt. Clifford at all times, Josephine left. Even with the precautions taken by the camp commander to insure her safety, Lt. Clifford managed to escape. But he was quickly captured, court-martialed and dismissed from the army. Josephine never heard from her husband again.

Traveling to San Francisco, where her brother, sister and mother were now living, Josephine taught German at the South Cosmopolitan School for a short time. During a brief visit with her friends in Arizona, Josephine heard of the new magazine, *Overland Monthly*. After submitting an article, "Down Among the Dead Letters", she was informed that Bret Harte had accepted the story and it was published in December 1869. Harte and her friends encouraged her to continue writing. She visited Harper Brothers, the publishing firm in New York, at the urging of friends. The company accepted one of her articles, paying her forty-five dollars, the first money that she earned as a writer. For the next fifty-two years, until her death in 1921, she wrote for various magazines and newspapers in both the East and West.

In 1880, with the earnings from her new career, Josephine purchased twenty-six acres at the head of Loma Prieta Avenue from Lyman Burrell and moved to the Santa Cruz Mountains. She built a ranch house, "Monte Paraiso", a barn, cook's house, and several outbuildings. Josephine joined the Summit Literary Society and contributed several articles, with no compensation, to the *Mountain Echoes* and became a well known and beloved member of the Summit community.

During a visit with friends in Arizona she was introduced to Jackson McCrackin, a gold miner and the Speaker of the first legislature of Arizona. They were married in 1882 in Salinas, California and moved to her ranch to live.

Over the years many of her literary friends came to the Summit area to visit her. They usually stayed at the Hotel Bohemia at the foot of Loma Prieta Avenue. Ambrose Bierce and Herman Scheffauer were very close friends of the McCrackins and were staying at Bohemia when the October 1899 fire destroyed much of the surrounding countryside, including Monte Paraiso. Scheffauer took a poetic photograph, after the fire, of Josephine, her clothes dirty and torn, with Bierce's cape around her shoulders, standing next to a chimney, among the ruins of her home.

After surveying the damage caused by the fire and realizing that, while the many destroyed homes could be replaced, the giant redwoods could not, she decided to try to save the remaining giants. In an article published in the *Santa Cruz*

Sentinel on March 7, 1900, she wrote of the plight of the giants that were destroyed, not only by fire but by axe. Her message was quickly taken up by nature lovers throughout the world. Through the efforts of these concerned people the Sempervirens Club of California was founded and in March, 1901, the first California Redwood Park was founded at Big Basin, near Boulder Creek, in the northern Santa Cruz Mountains. Josephine McCrackin's close friend, the poet Herman Scheffauer, wrote a tribute to her efforts:

SAVIOR OF THE SEQUOIAS

*The Titans of the forest, to the east winds sprung forth from the sea,
Give then, O worthy 'mongst women, their thanks and their greetings for thee!
When, under their ancient, overarching arms, your feet shall bestir the grass,
Bright dew from their boughs shall be shaken on your reverent head as you pass.
From their roots, clutching deep in the earth, to each patriarch's head in the skies,
The race of these giants had vanished, as the race of mortals dies;
Coeval with Earth and defying Time, they had perished by the blade,
If never your pitying heart and hand the hand of the vandal had stayed.
Therefore, in the forest silences, in the tongue of the noblest trees,
A name is whispered with love to the winds in their twilight symphonies.
They that are older than Egypt or Ind and shall outlive the Ultimate Man—
The deathless sequoias immortal shall hold that name like the spirit of Pan.
'Tis for this that the bearded Titans to the east wind have sprung forth from the sea,
Give them, O worthy 'mongst women, their thanks and their greetings for thee!*

Josephine McCrackin's conservationist work was not limited to the giants of the forest. In 1901, upset with the mass destruction of songbirds, she wrote numerous articles and founded the first bird-protection society of California, the Ladies' Forest and Song Birds Protection Association, and became the first president of the organization. She also became an honorary vice-president of the California Humane Association, an honorary vice-president of the Audubon Society, the Correspondence Secretary of the Humane Society, and a member of the California Game and Fish Protective Association. She was also interested in the women's movement of the day and because of her occupation as a writer became one of the original members of the Women's Pacific Coast Press Association.

Although their home was destroyed by the 1899 fire, the McCrackins continued to live on their ranch until Jackson McCrackin's death on December 14, 1904. In his memory a poem appeared in the February, 1905, issue of *The Realty*:

M'CRACKIN'S TOMB

*Beyond the mountain's crest, the stars
All night their watch are keeping;
Above a rocky, new-made grave,
Where a pioneer is sleeping.
Where oft he loved to rest him,
He sleeps a sound and peaceful sleep
Amid the scenes that blest him.*

*He sleeps, he sleeps, serene and calm,
Life's pains and perils, over,
The greenwood zephyrs, beneath their balm
Around their silent lover,
No careless throng treads here,
No hand profane shall move him,*

*But wild flowers soon the spot will cheer
And the wild birds soar above him.*

*Sleep on, sleep on then, old-time friend,
A fitting tomb is found thee;
The broad blue skies above thee bend,
The mountain tops surround thee
With heads uplifted, bold-
To meet all winds and weather,
You loved the silent hills, so old,
That stand unmoved forever.*

*Even should no tombstone rise
To mark his name above him
On memory's page it safely lies
Within the hearts that love him.*

After she sold the ranch, Josephine McCrackin moved to Gedenkheim, a cottage in Santa Cruz and continued to write. For a time she was on the staff of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. On December 21, 1920, she died in Santa Cruz, at the age of 82, and was buried in Salinas.

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