

Biog. F

Ms. Eliza

Eliza Farnham was one gutsy dame, a reform-the-world, do-it-yourself kind of woman—in a day when woman translated as prim and proper.

By Robert Hardy Andrews



DRAWN FROM A PORTRAIT IN CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION

AT BREAK of dawn on the morning after Independence Day at Santa Cruz in 1850, a widow named Eliza W. Farnham put on pants, took a hammer in her hand, and started building a home for herself and her two small sons. There were men around, all kinds of them, but she saw none she

thought could do the job any better than she could, if as well. And Women's Lib was born in California, a century and then some before it hit headlines in the East, which Eliza had left in 1849.

In those days, men who made it to the Promised Land bragged that "The cowards never started, and the weak

died on the way." Eliza didn't bother to challenge the all-male chorus. She had been a one-woman Gold Rush since February 2, 1849, exactly a year after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo added California to the United States—which was only nine days after Jim Marshall found gold at Sutter's Mill on the American River, setting off a

ILLUSTRATION BY HANK HINTON

race for riches that began under *Men Only* rules.

Eliza had already shown herself to be a woman of iron determination and unusual pursuits. The lack of opportunity for formal schooling only spurred her on to educate herself. After marrying a lawyer and moving from Illinois to New York, she became matron for female prisoners in Sing Sing. She held the then radical notion that prisoners would respond better to kind treatment than to harsh punishment. In 1848 she became a widow and decided to go to California, not an easy choice then for a woman alone in the world with two youngsters depending on her.

In New York, Eliza published a circular bearing the endorsements of Horace Greeley, Henry Ward Beecher and William Cullen Bryant. She wrote:

The death of my husband, Thomas J. Farnham, Esquire, at San Francisco, in September last, renders it expedient that I should visit California during the coming season. Having a desire to accomplish some greater good by my journey thither than to give the necessary attention to my private affairs, and believing that the presence of women would be one of the surest checks upon many of the evils that are apprehended there, I desire to ask attention to the following sketch of a plan for organizing a party of such persons to emigrate to that country.

Only six months before, the first Woman's Rights Convention in America had assembled at the home of Elizabeth Cady Stanton in Seneca Falls, New York. But the rights that Eliza Farnham claimed had nothing to do with votes for women, as her circular indicated:

Among the many privations and deteriorating influences to which the thousands flocking to California will be subjected, one of the greatest is the absence of woman, with all her kindly cares and powers, so peculiarly conservative to man under such circumstances. It would exceed the limits of this circular to hint at the benefits that

would flow to the growing population of that wonderful region from the introduction among them of intelligent, virtuous and efficient women. Of such only is it proposed to make up this company. It is believed that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of such females in our country who are not bound by any tie that would hold them here, who might, by going thither, have the satisfaction of employing themselves greatly to the benefit and advantage of those who are there, and at the same time of serving their own interest more effectually than by following any employment that offers to them in the East.

A hundred thousand men, but very few women, had gone fortune hunting on the far side of the continent. Companies for California were formed, sometimes composed entirely of marriageable males, and youth was leading the westward race. From Massachusetts alone, 124 companies set off for high adventure, leaving lonely maidens to wonder if they would ever return. Eliza Farnham saw the spectre of spinsterhood that was spreading across New England, and offered single girls the possibility of rescue from this perdition.

The company shall consist of persons not under 25 years of age, who shall bring from their clergyman, or some other authority of the town where they reside, satisfactory testimonial of education, character, capacity, et cetera, and who can contribute \$250 to defray the expense of the voyage, make suitable provision for their accommodation after reaching San Francisco until they shall be able to enter upon some occupation for their support, and create a fund to be held in reserve for . . . those who may fall ill or otherwise need aid before they are able to provide for themselves.

Such an arrangement, the prospectus said, with 100 to 150 maidens in the company, would make it possible to purchase or charter a ship, "and fit it up with everything necessary to comfort on the voyage." And "The combination of all for the support of

each would give such security, both as to health, person, and character, as should remove all reasonable hesitation from the minds of those who may be disposed and able to join such a mission." But hesitation there was. It seemed that Eliza's noble scheme appealed to few but Horace Greeley and Henry Ward Beecher and William Cullen Bryant.

Waiting, Eliza fell ill, and for two months lay bedridden. Then one morning she got up and began to pack. With only three women who had answered the prospectus, and her two small sons and their nursemaid, she boarded the schooner *Louis Philippe* at Baltimore, and set sail for California 'round the Horn.

The ship was miserably overcrowded. Rations were workhouse poor. There was not enough potable water. Though everyone grumbled, no one dared to complain to the bellying, brutish captain. No one, that is, but Eliza. Facing him, she insisted he put in at the nearest port and take on fresh supplies, including lemons and limes to ward off scurvy, and pure drinking water. He roared. She refused to back down. Growling, he surrendered, but did not forgive.

At Valparaiso in Chile, many weeks out from Baltimore, Eliza hired a new servant. The captain ordered the girl put off the boat because she did not have a passport. Eliza argued with the captain, as she had been assured that the girl did not need one. She then went to the Intendente's office to straighten things out, and returned to see the *Louis Philippe* already out at sea, with her children and companions aboard. "I did not faint . . . but my faculties seemed stunned and scattered." But not for long. "Destitute, in a city of strangers . . . in less than an hour I was under the roof of an excellent clergyman." By noon the next day she was furnished with a wardrobe bountiful enough for a six months' voyage. "Houses were opened to me, and money supplied for my wants."

Still a month passed, while she won-

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dered if she would ever see her children again. Then a ship came in. "We made San Francisco in 38 days, but were nine more getting in through the Golden Gate." No hysteria; not for the Unstoppable Eliza. "At last we dropped anchor somewhere off North Beach." Through rain and fog, she went seeking some trace of the *Louis Philippe*. Ships beyond counting lay abandoned in the bay, their crews and passengers long gone to the gold-camps. But amidst the forest of masts and sails, she found her sons. Passengers had looked out for them, confident that somehow she would eventually show up. She made no great fuss about what they called a miracle, but immediately sued the ship's agents for damages. "I endured a variety of annoyances and trials." Against the odds, she got a settlement. With her two sons and a friend, a Miss Sampson, and an erstwhile farmer who had given up hope of finding gold, she sailed from San Francisco to Santa Cruz, "to try the chances of farming in California." Again, the odds were all against her.

Carried ashore through the surf, she led a two-mile walk to the grandly named *El Rancho La Libertad*, which she had bought sight unseen. It had not been farmed for years. The only building was a ramshackle structure, twenty-five feet long, slanting from fifteen to ten feet wide. "There is not a foot of floor, nor a pane of glass, nor a brick, not anything in the shape of a stove." You could walk through the walls. She must have wondered if at last her luck had run out. It hadn't. Kindly neighbors appeared, and she had her first acquaintance with Alta California hospitality. Grateful for food and shelter for a night, she rejected well-meant advice to go back to San Francisco, and settled in on her hardscrabble property.

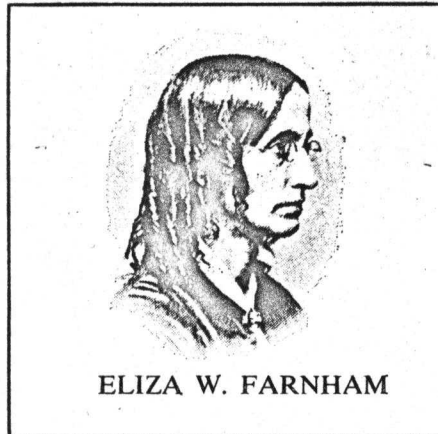
"Our cares were to be there, and our homes must be with them." She had no money with her and wanted for everything needed for farming but seed, a plow and the labor of one man. Refusing charity, she accepted the loan of two horses and a mule, to be paid for as soon as possible, and set

about planting a crop. After a month, she went horseback over the mountains to San Francisco. "A habit-skirt which I was assured I could not wear through the mountains was packed conveniently that it might be put on when we reached inhabited regions on the other side." This was soon to be put away and worn no more.

One day in the roaring city was enough. Elections were going on. "One of the candidates for Sheriff was a professional gambler and keeper of a hotel on the Plaza." Back to *El Rancho La Libertad*.

Three months later a cloud of grasshoppers descended on her fields. "Not

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ELIZA W. FARNHAM

less than half the entire planting was destroyed in the course of sixteen or twenty days."

But Unstoppable Eliza had no time for feminine tears. Another planting. Then herds of cattle overran her unfenced acres. She rode, or ran on foot, driving off the destroyers.

On the 4th of July, "after joining in the first celebration of that day ever had in Santa Cruz," she declared her own independence. Lumber sawed under her direction lay ready. Donning pants in place of bloomers, she stretched strings between stakes to mark a foundation for a house with parlor, dining room, bedroom and bathroom, and "in the pleasantest yet most secluded corner... my library." Walls rose, and the roof went into place. Off again to San Francisco.

Returning, she found that cattle had broken through her fences and flattened her potato rows, and also "a cherished asparagus bed which had been my pride," and all the tomatoes,

squashes and beets.

"We were always destitute of something essential to comfortable house-keeping." The family went without milk for two months. Then she put on pants, mounted her horse, and went foraging for an unbranded cow. She found one. The creature was perverse, but at length gave up the battle.

Two rooms of her house were finished, partitioned and floored. She stretched calico to cover the inner walls. "We have a home, and a farm, and each other, and we will get along." Eliza decided there was no more that needed telling, and wrote "The End" on a final page of her memoirs (*California, Indoors and Out*, Dix, Edwards & Co., New York, 1856).

In 1856, Eliza returned to New York where her book about her California adventures was published. She spent the next two years studying medicine; and since she had never completely given up her plan to help women find homes on the West Coast, she arranged several trips for female emigrants.

Eliza returned to California in 1859, worked for a while at an insane asylum in Stockton and gave a series of highly successful lectures in various cities. During the Civil War she volunteered to work as a nurse on the battlefields. It was perhaps the strain of her efforts after the Battle of Gettysburg which led to the consumption that claimed her life in 1864, at the age of forty-nine.

In all, Eliza authored five books and edited another. In *Woman and Her Era* (1864) she argued persuasively that women were capable of vocations other than motherhood—of which she was certainly ample proof.

Eliza has not been completely forgotten. A few years back a Bay Area chapter of E Clampus Vitus, a men's club dating from the Gold Rush and dedicated to history and fun, created a female auxiliary, the "Eliza W. Farnham Art, Literary and Garden Circle." Women's Lib historians have yet to discover her, though. It is quite possible that she would not care; throughout her busy life she proved to her own satisfaction that sex is no obstacle to a woman determined to follow her own mind.

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