

history

From Marlene Wiley's
Mountain History Archive
**Women of the
Santa Cruz Mountains**

Joan Barriga
Deceased Mountain Historian

The steep dirt road scraped over the hill to Lexington by Maggie Jones' father has long been forgotten, as have the settlements of Lexington, Alma, and Wrights Station. The stagecoach road leading out of Los Gatos has become Highway 17, and the six-horse Concord stage and Mrs. Paddock's Lexington House are nothing but memories of a time almost forgotten. The faint trace of railroad ties leading into the dark tunnel-opening at Wrights reminds us that not too many years ago, the canyon of Los Gatos Creek echoed and re-echoed with train whistles. But, through it all, the mountains endured and continued to lure people to make their homes in the canyons and on the ridges. And some of these people were the women who homesteaded and worked in the mountains.

When we consider how sharply individualistic these Santa Cruz Mountain women were, we might wonder if there was any common thread that bound them together. What did poet Sara Bard Field have in common with the widow Mary Ann Brown? Or, for that matter, what common denominator did writer and conservationist Josephine McCrackin share with stagecoach driver Charley Parkhurst, or homesteader Clarissa Burrell?

They shared something more important than having been pioneers in their individual ways; something even more important than their love of the sometimes harsh and unforgiving mountains where they made their homes. The single shining thread woven through the fabric that each of them shared was courage—courage to be individuals who should be remembered.

As a long-time resident of the Santa Cruz Mountains it was probably inevitable that my interest and curiosity would be aroused when I came across abandoned cabins, crumbling settlements, sealed-up railroad tunnels, and the faint but persistent traces of the old South Pacific Coast's overgrown roadbed.

John V. Young's tales of the early settlers *Ghost Towns of the Santa Cruz Mountains* and Bruce MacGregor's readable *South*



Josephine McCrackin



Eliza Farnham



Juanita Goldman



Clarissa Burrell

Pacific Coast started me off on what turned out to be a fulfilling and fascinating study of this area and the pioneers who made their homes here. Where had they come from? How did they get here? And, why did they choose to stay in the mountains, when life would certainly have been easier in the more settled and "civilized" regions?

As I read about loggers, hunters, railroaders, and stagecoach drivers, I noticed a fleeting allusion to a wife, mother, or to Southern Pacific's first woman station agent, but what about other pioneer women? What

sort of lives did they lead?

I began researching the lives of the women pioneers. From bits and pieces of information found in larger works, diaries kept by some of the families (Birney Burrell's *Diary*), letters written to relatives back East (Clarissa Burrell's letters were a particularly rich source), and published writings (Josephine McCrackin and Eliza Farnham), a more complete picture of their lives began to emerge. One of the most detailed and enjoyable depictions of day-to-day life in the Santa Cruz Mountains was Emma

Garrod's autobiography, *One Life, Mine*. I found that the contributions these pioneer women made to the development of this area were an important, though frequently overlooked, contribution to the history of California.



Laura Sears



Charlotte "Charley" Parkhurst



Alice Matty

About the Author

Joan Barriga lived in the Santa Cruz Mountains, surrounded by early California history. She was a docent at Forbes Mill Regional History Museum in Los Gatos, a participant in "Living History Days" at the San Jose Historical Museum, and, as a special-education volunteer, taught local history at elementary schools. She earned a B.A. degree in English from the University of New Mexico, and a M.A. degree in English from San Jose State University. She wrote *The Holy City Sideshow, about Father William E. Riker and his Perfect Christian Divine Way cult that flourished in the Santa Cruz Mountains from 1920 to 1940. It was published by the Santa Clara County Pioneer Association.*



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