**Women of the West**

**Bridget “Biddy” Mason**

African women during the gold rush not only survived unbelievable hardships, but showed their courage, determination and intelligence. Meet Biddy Mason who was born a slave in Mississippi in 1818. As a child she was separated from her parents and sold several times. She worked on plantations in Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina. She was not allowed to learn to read or write, but she learned many medical skills, especially the ability to deliver babies and the use of herbs to help the sick.

When she was 30 years old she walked 1,700 miles behind a covered wagon caravan. First her owner, Robert Smith, took her to Utah, and a few years later to California. Her jobs along the way were to set up and break down camp, cook the meals, herd the cattle, deliver babies and take care of her three young daughters. Whether she knew it or not, her walk to California was leading her to freedom!

California was a “free” state, even though the laws were not well written on slavery. After five years Biddy challenged her owner for her freedom. Her owner was fleeing with Biddy and his other slaves to Texas (a “slave” state), so that he could keep them. The sheriff found out that the blacks were being illegally held, and he gathered a posse of cowboys and vaqueros who caught up with the wagon train and prevented the “owner” from leaving the state. Biddy petitioned the court for freedom for herself and her family of 13 women and children. The judge ruled in favor of Biddy, citing California’s 1850 Constitution, which made slavery against the law.

This triumph in court represented a great victory toward justice in California, but the battle was not won. Californians may have been anti-slavery, but they were not anti-racist. Two years after Biddy and her family received their freedom, reformist Georgiana Kirby wrote:

I heard last week that there was a fuss in the common school…about two colored children, nice, intelligent, well-behaved children all say, but disgraced by their skin. I understand that the children are admitted but put off by themselves, poor things and not allowed to take places no matter how much they out-spelled those above them. The more violently pro-slavery do not permit their children to go to the school at all. The ignorant, white people from the slave states are the curse of California, they are so stupid and conceited they think one man (to-wit, themselves) just as good as another, providing there be not the least drop of African blood in them.

Biddy Mason and her family moved to Los Angeles where she organized an African American church and started a school for African American children. She worked as a midwife and a nurse and saved her money. She purchased some land that became very valuable in downtown Los Angeles.

When she was growing up as a slave she was not allowed to learn to read or write, so she was illiterate. However, due to her good business knowledge, savings, and her purchases of real estate, she became a very wealthy woman. She was well respected because she helped many people and organizations in the community. She invited needy people to stay in her home. Lines of people would form who needed her help. She donated money and land to schools, day care centers, grocery stores and churches. She also visited people in jail regularly.

Biddy Mason’s great-granddaughter quoted Ms. Mason as saying “*If you hold our hand closed, nothing good can come in. The open hand is blessed, for it gives in abundance, even as it receives.”*

*Sources:*

*http://www.blackpast.org/aaw/mason-bridget-biddy-1818-1891*

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*Levy, JoAnn, They Saw the Elephant, Women in the California Gold Rush. Archon Books, 1990.*

**Charley Parkhurst**

Men made up most of the population during the gold rush; some records show that only 10% were women. These women adapted to the environment, and solved challenges in interesting ways. For example, Charlotte Parkhurst ran away from an abusive orphanage when she was twelve years old. At that time boys and girls were often dressed in shirts and overalls and had the same haircut. Short hair was much easier to keep clean and vermin free. Charley was mistaken for a boy, which was to her advantage, because she was able to get a job taking care of horses at a stable. She was very skilled with horses and enjoyed her work with them.

Charley continued to dress like a man so that it would be possible for her to take care of herself by finding work. She met some men who were headed to California to start the California Stage Company. When she was thirty-nine years old, she went to California to be a stagecoach driver, or a “whip” for this company. She traveled on a ship from the Boston on the route through Panama. Then she took another ship to get up to San Francisco, California.

Carrying mail, passengers, or supplies, many times Charley would drive both ways on some of the runs. This meant she had to drive through the night, she and earned double pay. She was becoming well known for her driving skills and her ability to handle teams of six horses. Once she drove her passengers over the rain-swollen Tuolumne River. They reached solid ground just before the bridge collapsed! Another time, Charley rolled an empty coach and “busted in” his sides (probably broke a few ribs), but never saw a doctor about it. Unfortunately Charley was kicked in the eye by an unhappy horse, and became known as “Cockeyed Charley.” Some refer to him as “One Eyed Charlie”.

“While driving at a fast clip, he [Charley] could, some claimed, run over a half dollar that was lying in the road, with the front and rear wheels of his stage. Some found his proficiency with a whip “downright spooky”. Parkhurst could, the stories went, “cut the end off an envelope held at arm’s length at 15 paces, or cut the cigar from a man’s mouth at the same distance without hurting anyone.”

In addition to being an excellent horseman, Charley was quite brave. Her stage was held up by a robber known as Sugarfoot. When Sugarfoot held Charley up a second time six months later, she shot and killed him. Her bravery helped her to be trusted to deliver large sums of money. She worked for Wells Fargo Bank; they knew their money was safe with Charley!

Women at this time did not have the right to vote. However, because people thought Charley was a man, some say she was able to register to vote. The story is told that she voted for the first time in a federal election at age fifty-five. This happened fifty-two years before women won the right to vote through the19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. Charley was the first woman to vote in California.

Charley died at the age of sixty-seven. Some believe that this is when it was discovered that she was a woman, and not a man. Some of her best friends were shocked at this news. She was a truly courageous woman who played an important role during this part of California’s history.

<http://www.fernjhill.com/fact-legend.html>

<http://westerntrips.blogspot.com/2011/09/most-famous-stagecoach.htmlhttp://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/tgi-bios/charley-parkhurst>

**Louisa Clapp**

The extent of the women's participation in the gold rush is captured in the richness of their own words. They wrote letters, diaries, and other personal accounts describing how they coped with adversity and freedom on the frontier.

Mrs. Louisa Clapp was one of these valuable women writers of the gold rush. Born in New Jersey, she was the oldest of seven children. Her father died when she was twelve and six years later her mother died. Family helped to take care of the seven children, and Louisa was able to finish school. She became a teacher, and also traveled around New England.

Louisa married a young man named Fayette Clapp who was finishing his medical training. They were both the adventurous type; they took off to sail around the horn of South America to San Francisco during the gold rush. Once they finally arrived in San Francisco, Fayette decided to try his hand at mining camp medicine. He went off to the mines and left Louisa behind. She first began writing while she waited to hear from her husband. She wrote essays and poems and used the “pen name” of Dame Shirley. She published her first essay in a newspaper.

Louisa did not want to be left out of the adventure and decided to join her husband at the mining camp. Her sister and her friends were very upset about the thought of her being in the mountains, and out in the wild, especially during the harsh winter! However, Louisa said she would go to the mines rather than be left behind, whatever the discomfort might be. She described herself as a stubborn person who has always had a passionate desire to do everything which people said she could *not* do!

The Clapps’ built a rustic log cabin near Rich Bar, north of Sacramento on the Feather River. Louise began writing letters to her sister in New England. These letters were published years later as a collection known as the Shirley Letters. The letters are known among the most important contributions to gold rush literature. Louisa wrote to her sister to describe her cabin furnishings:

“We have four chairs…I seriously proposed having three-legged stools…I must mention that the floor is so uneven that no article of furniture gifted with four legs pretends to stand upon but three at once, so that the chairs, tables, etc., remind you constantly of a dog with a sore foot.”

Most of the cabins, including the Clapps, were “guiltless of glass”, so it is not surprising when Louisa described, “the best built log cabin on the river” in a letter to her sister. She wrote about the cabin owner’s creative way to build a window by taking out a log and inserting glass jars in its place! Louise wrote, “Really, everybody ought to go to the mines, just to see how little it takes to make people comfortable in the world.”



Although some women were miners, Louisa did not share “gold fever” and in fact, she did not enjoy mining! She wrote the following words:

“…I wet my feet, tore my dress, spoilt a pair of new gloves, nearly froze my fingers, got an awful headache, took cold and lost a valuable breastpin.”

Some women mined with their husbands, while others, like this woman of 1852, only visited the diggings*. California State Library*

We learned from Louisa Clapp’s writing that women were hard workers and had many different jobs such as: teachers, actresses, boardinghouse keepers, and missionaries. Louisa much admired “Mrs. R., “Rich Bar’s washerwoman. Mrs. R. earned a hundred dollars a week washing clothes, more money than the majority of miners! Louisa heard a miner heap praises on the woman:

Magnificent woman…a wife of the right sort, she is. “nine hundred

dollars in nine weeks, clear of all expenses, by washing! Such women ain’t common, I tell you; if they were, a man might marry and make money by the operation.”

Through Mrs. Clapp's often humorous and descriptive letters, we learn about the lives of the men, women, and children in the mining camps. Over the years, writers have written short stories based on Louisa Clapp’s *Shirley Letters*.

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