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California's First Quilting Party

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Several years ago it dawned on me that I was better acquainted with the history of New England than with the history of California—although I have never lived in New England. Therefore I began to do a little reading of California and western history. Not serious research, just reading the basic books on the library shelves. When I came to the books about John Sutter and Sutter's Fort, so famous for being the site of the beginning of the California gold rush, I found that historians have made great use of a document called the New Helvetia Diary. As I have also made use of it, I will introduce a little background information.

John Sutter was a native of Switzerland. He named his establishment New Helvetia; other people called it Sutter's Fort. Sutter eventually built thick walls around the central living and business area of New Helvetia, and even erected two gun towers containing some small cannons, but his place was not our modern idea of a military fort. It was the headquarters of Sutter's ranch and a trading post. In the south it would have been called a plantation; in the midwest, a settlement.

Sutter raised mostly wheat, but also cattle for their hides and sheep for their wool. He hired local Indians and other people who came by, and tried to establish a fur-gathering business, a hat manufactory and a wool blanket factory, with some small success. The early pioneers coming over the Sierras usually headed for Sutter's—the largest of the few establishments in the Central Valley. Sutter welcomed them all at first. As the new settlers were foreigners in northern Mexico at that time, Sutter, now a Mexican citizen, helped them get passports from the local authorities, gave them jobs at New Helvetia, and generally helped them get a start.

The later gold rush was the ruination of Sutter. All his employees left for the mines, and thousands upon thousands of people camped in his wheatfields and slaughtered his cattle for food. He never recovered from it.

The New Helvetia Diary was written before the gold rush. It began in September of 1845 and ended in May 1848. It is a daily chronicle of events and comings and goings at New Helvetia during that period. California's first quilting party is recorded in the New Helvetia Diary. The entry is dated Thursday, January 29th, 1846, and reads "All the people attended the quilting at Mrs. Montgomery's."[1] This brief notation is the only reference in the Diary to the quilting party, and it would be very easy for historians to slide right over it. However, three biographers of Sutter chose to quote or mention the entry in their books. Richard Dillon, in FOOL'S GOLD, wrote "When a Mrs. Allen Montgomery put on a quilting bee—unheard-of in California before this time—he [Sutter] held the fort, practically alone, giving all his men permission to attend the social event of the season, . . ."[2]

After coming across this reference in the third book, I found myself totally plagued with the questions: *Who is* Mrs. Montgomery? and How could she be having a quilting in January 1846? I have since found quite a number of bits and pieces of information about this woman—and about the quilting party. Much of her eventful life took place under two other names, as she was married twice more. This paper will concentrate on the Montgomery years.

She was born Sarah Armstrong in southern Ohio in August 1825.[3] Her father was a farmer and before Sarah was nine moved the family to Indiana. In 1839 the family moved still farther west to St. Joseph's County, Missouri.[4] Sarah had no formal education; she could read, but did not learn to write until she was twenty-one.[5] In Missouri she married Allen Montgomery, and in the spring of 1844, Sarah, at eighteen, and Allen set off for California in a small company that included Dr. and Mrs. John Townsend, and Mrs. Townsend's brother Moses Schallenberger, aged seventeen. They brought two wagons with them. One had furniture, clothing, books, and medicines,[6] while the other carried "an invoice of costly goods consisting of broadcloth, satins and silks."[7]

This small group joined up with other small groups to form what is now known as the Stevens-Murphy overland party. All together 26 men, 9 women, 8 boys and 8 girls (51 people) started on the journey. They had eleven wagons, pulled by oxen, plus cows and riding horses. It took them a full year to walk to the Central Valley of California, during which time two more babies were born. The trip is one of the most famous in California history, as theirs was the first group to bring wagons over the Sierra Mountains.[8]

The wagons figure rather largely in the Stevens party story. At this early date, when there was no wagon *trail* across the mountains, they

were a real hindrance. Oxen are very slow beasts, and finding a way across the plains, rivers and mountains for the wagons took far more time than making the trip on horseback with pack horses carrying supplies as a few earlier groups had done. The importance of the wagons was not for carrying trail supplies, and certainly not for riding in. It was much too bumpy in the freight wagons used in the 1840s to ride in one from choice across the trackless country. Instead, the advantage at this time was in the goods carried in the wagons to sell in Alta California.

The population in what was then northern Mexico was made up of a number of native American groups and an official governing group of people from Mexico, most of whom were of Spanish descent. There was only a handful of people of "American" or Anglo-Saxon descent. The market for wool "broadcloth, satins and silks," was expected to be the Mexican nationals, and was based on twenty years of experience in Missouri of the Santa Fe Trail trade. Trade to Mexico had come to an abrupt halt the previous year when Mexico closed the customs house at Santa Fe due to troubles in Texas and generally worsening relations with the United States.[9] But the eastern and northern borders of California were undefined, and had no customs house. The Sierras themselves were the only obstacle to the goods trade.

The Stevens-Murphy party journey across the plains and the northern Rockies was free of serious problems. But it was slow, and they did not reach the eastern slopes of the Sierras until October. Winter began unusually early that year and by the time they found their way up to what is now called Donner Lake snow lay on the ground. The animals could not feed and the wagons were holding the party back. At the lake five of the wagons, including those of the Townsends, were pulled up and three of the men volunteered to stay with them over the winter. The rest of the party went slowly on, searching for a way through the snowy mountains, hauling the other six wagons up and down precipices on ropes, and exhausting the energies of the now starving oxen.

By the time they reached the headwaters of the Yuba River it was December and they were running very short of food. So the party made camp there with the other wagons, and the able-bodied men took off for Sutter's Fort on the horses—leaving the women and children to stay with the freight. The plan was to bring back supplies and help from Sutter's but, incredible as it seems now, when the men reached Sutter's rancho there was a provincial civil war in progress and they were all recruited by Sutter to go fight in it. The men there-

fore rode off to central California for two months.

On January 15 Sutter wrote from "about 50 a 60 miles south from Monterey" to his assistant at New Helvetia, Pierson B. Reading:

> "I got the liberty for Stevens, two Murphey's, Martin, Cordua and Gulnack to return. These Men wanted to go home to bring assistence to their family's in the Mountains and to safe their property; please let them have the Necessary things.... If they return soon [from the mountains] please employ Mr Stevens and also Mr. Montgomery."[10]

When the men returned to the mountains, they found that the women had despaired of being rescued and, having really run out of food (some had even eaten the hides of the oxen), had moved themselves on foot through the snowbound wilderness twenty miles farther down the mountains toward New Helvetia. The women and children's group now included month-old Elizabeth Yuba Murphy, born at the snow camp on the Yuba River.

After dealing with spring floods on the northern California rivers, the Stevens party all finally reached Sutter's Fort in March of 1845. Some of them went quickly to other places to settle. Allen Montgomery and Sarah were sent by John Sutter up to the pine woods on the south fork of the American River, at what is now Coloma, to work in the lumber and shingle industry for the Fort. There they lived for more than a year in a cabin they built, and it was there that Sarah had her quilting the next January. There were 18 other men, Indian and white, in the same vicinity working at lumbering,[11] but Sarah appears to have been the only woman. It must have been rather lonely for a twenty-year old.

Another pioneer in similar circumstances three years later wrote in her memoirs:

> "Sutter engaged my husband and I to go to Coloma. My husband to be the blacksmith for the sawmill... Myself to cook for the hands which were about 15 men.... After a while... I wanted to see a white woman again so they took me and my child about 15 miles to... see Mrs. Wimmer & her family. I stayed two days & nights & then returned home. Well I found her camping out and Sleeping in the wagon. she was very glad to see me and we did not sleep very much, but put in the time talking while I stayed,..."[12]

As the New Helvetia Diary did not begin until September 1845 it does not record the arrival of the Stevens-Murphy party in March. It does, however, mention groups arriving steadily after September, and the reports they brought of other groups behind them. Immigrants

were also coming down toward Sutter's from Oregon. There was beginning to be a fair number of people in the neighborhood.

According to the New Helvetia Diary, on January 5th of 1846, "Mrs. Montgomery came to the fort." Presumably Sarah issued her invitations then for the party three weeks later. John Sutter left another notation of the party in a letter written on the 29th of January, in which he wrote: "To day was a quilting at Montgomeris, the whole Neighborhood was invited, and a great many was there present, I keept house and let go nearly all the Gentlemen."[13]

Thus it is fairly certain that all of the women then living in the vicinity did go to the party.

Through various highly scattered records[14,15,16,17] it has been possible to find the names of some of the women who were living within an easy day's journey of Sarah's home. Mary Bolger Murphy and Ann Martin Murphy were living on the Cosumnes River, twenty miles south of the Montgomerys. At Sutter's Fort, thirty-five miles to the southwest, lived Ann Marshall Smith, her daughter Mary Marshall, Lizzie Sumner Davis, her sister Mrs. R.K. Payne, Margaret Nash, Margaret Pyles McDowell, Mrs. Daniel Leahy, Mrs. Eugene Skinner, and Mrs. William Tustin. Most probably living at or near the fort were Mrs. Felix Scott, Mrs. Truman Bonney, her daughter Miss Bonney, Mrs. Jarvis Bonney, America Kelsey, her sister Mrs. Joseph Buzzell, and Nancy Hess Chamberlain, a very recent bride of thirteen. Mrs. John Sinclair lived on a rancho two miles east of Sutter's.

Besides Sarah, then, there were eleven women who almost surely attended the quilting, and at least eight others who very well may have. These women had all, within the last year or so, traveled 1800 miles across the country. A thirty mile trip on horseback to a party would have been a piece of cake!

The other element necessary for a quilting party is, of course, a quilt or quilts. No quilt identified as having been completed at that party has made an appearance. Without it, no definitive descriptions can be made. However, there is general information based on the time and the place which allows for intelligent speculation.

For example, it could not have been a quilt design developed after 1846. The fabric could not have had synthetic fiber in it. A further item of information is that, according to various documents and records, there were six weddings at New Helvetia in the three month period of December 1845 to February 1846. Some new, pretty bedding would have been very welcome. Another item has been gleaned from diaries and memoirs of the period that mention the frequent use of quilts and bedding as room dividers.[18,19] Housing in those early days

was extremely primitive. Families lived in all kinds of hastily put-up cabins and shacks, in tents, and sometimes in tule wigwams when lumber was not available. It is therefore safe to assume that the quilts at Sarah's party were sturdy, fairly simple and practical, rather than fancy or elaborate.

There is also some information about the fabric most probably used. Having followed Sarah and the Stevens party this far, one cannot help thinking of the wagon-load of "costly goods"—"broadcloth, satins and silks"—that was left over the winter at the mountain lake. But the report of the journey in the memoir of Moses Schallenberger, who stayed with the wagons until rescued from the snow in late February, tells that when the men went back in the summer to bring the wagons in they found them empty. Local Indians had found a gift from Providence.

In the same memoir quoted before, Eliza Marshall Gregson wrote:

> "there was no work for woman excepting a little cooking & very little at that. & our cloathes we had to patch untill the original peice could scarcely be found. our men worked for 1 dollar per day. & common dress goods $1 per yard. so it took $8 to buy one dress."[20]

Under those conditions, making quilts at all seems rather unlikely.

However, there was another event in California that undoubtedly had a bearing on this historic quilting party. Not in the Central Valley, but on the coast at Monterey. At that period Monterey was the only significant seaport in Alta California, and it contained the only customs house. All foreign merchandise destined for sale in Alta California had to go through customs at Monterey. But Monterey was a long way from Mexico's center of government and, since Mexico had only recently won its independence from Spain and was still going through the throes of developing its own governmental system, the customs house was very weakly administered. The duties charged at Monterey could often be "fiddled."

The biggest game in town, however, was smuggling. It went on for years with various agreements and payoffs. Smuggling has its hazards —one being that goods must be landed at night on a rugged coast. On the night of July 27, 1845, the schooner *Star of the West* crashed on the rocks of Point Lobos, the southern arm of Carmel Bay. Contemporaries agreed that she was trying to smuggle some of her goods ashore before appearing at the customs house for official clearance, but the official story was that the ship had mistaken Carmel Bay for Monterey Bay immediately to the north. Much of this event is recorded in the letters of Thomas O. Larkin, at that time the

American consul in Monterey and one of its most prominent merchants.

The significance of this wrecked schooner is of course its cargo. The *Star of the West* was from Liverpool, and was laden primarily with English textiles, including English printed calico. Excerpts from letters of Larkin read thus:

> "The English Schr "Star of the West"... seven months from Liverpool, struck on the rocks at Point Lobos... about 10 oclock at night the 27 of last month.... By 4 oclock I had three boats with people along side the wreck.... The whole deck was under water, the railing of the vessel and chains covered with Callicoes of every colour which was coming out of the wreck as the Boxes broke up.... The wreckers continued several days at work bringing up goods 16 to 20 [feet] under water."[21]

and, a month later:

> "The English Schr "Star of the West"... one of the very best of cargoes, mistook Carmel Bay,... some Foreigners have taken up about 50 to 70000 yds of linen and wide fine mantas. Still at it."[22]

Larkin also wrote to various merchants up and down the coast suggesting that they bid on the salvage from the wreck. The bids came in with prices per "piece"—that is a full loom piece, what today would be called a bolt. Some of the bids were: "mixed Cotton Cloth—$1.40¢; figured muslin 32 inches wide—$2.13¢; Calico prints 36 inches wide—$2.00; English silk—$9.00; Velvet—$1.50¢."[23]

The news had traveled quickly. On September 27th, John Sutter wrote to Larkin: "Some of the Damaged Goods of the wreked Vessel would answer very well for Indians if it is cheaper."[24] He also sent the news on to P. B. Reading: "Whole Monterey is full of Goods from the wrecked Vessel, and sold very cheap,..."[25]

The salvaged goods were cheap indeed. Printed calico at two dollars per bolt, figured muslins at slightly more, compared with plain cotton dress goods at a dollar a yard was an opportunity not to be missed. When he ordered the cloth, Sutter may have been thinking mostly of the Indians who worked for him, but he would not have been unmindful of the immigrants already at New Helvetia and the new parties of '45, now in the mountains and fast approaching. The first of these new immigrants had already reached the Fort when he wrote to Larkin.

Within the Fort, Sutter had a store where he retailed goods and supplies of many kinds. He paid Indians who worked for him with metal

tokens he made, and these could be exchanged for merchandise at the store. Sutter's store, of course, was open to anyone and was much patronized by Americans for staples such as flour and butter, shoes and men's clothing. In those days women's clothing did not come "ready-made." A new supply of inexpensive printed calico would not stay on the shelves for long. However, more immigrant wagons were coming in to New Helvetia by this time and it could be expected that some of them would be carrying competing goods. Mr. Sublette, a St. Louis merchant, had ridden in from the mountains on October 7th and reported that sixty wagons were on their way.[26]

But Sutter's order of Monterey goods got left at Yerba Buena in the course of shipment, and Sutter became quite upset. He wrote to Reading a week after he had received Sublette's news:

> "The boxe... has not come, and was neglected by all who was there,... and so I am destitute of Goods, the boxe contents a good deal of Manta, Callico & Hdkfs, and strong Drill. It is enough to make a Man grazy when business is not better attended,..."[27]

In the same letter he added a postscript:

> "Mr Knight a young man of the Emigrants meet with a misfortune, he had a considerable Quantity of Goods, a Keg of Powder Ketched fire, and destroyed his wagon, all the Goods burnt up,..."

Two weeks later he wrote again:

> "Never a thing happened more contrary as this boxe... I send now nearly express for these unfortunate Case of Goods"[28]

By early November, having been sent for "express," the cheap goods would be ready to sell. They would certainly be priced under the cost of goods brought overland. Sutter would want to make sure of selling them and could afford to keep his prices low, having gotten them so cheaply. Here, at last, were low-cost fabrics to make quilts.

The new immigration of that autumn, 1845, brought at least twenty-two additional women to New Helvetia. Many of them remained in or near the Fort for a few months or years before settling permanently elsewhere. And that winter on January 29, 1846, many of those pioneer women went to Sarah Montgomery's quilting.

It can be concluded that a young woman of twenty, having emigrated from midwestern United States to northern Mexico, would bring with her a desire for a familiar kind of beauty. She would seek out the company of other American women. She would join with

them in an enterprise of creativity common to women of all areas of the United States and therefore mutually understood. She would take advantage of the available textile resources—in this instance so providentially offered by a shipwreck 200 miles away. She would express aspects of her young life in the making of a useful object, and in so doing would join her unknown sister and brother craftspeople the world around. All of these elements are to be found in Sarah Armstrong Montgomery's quilting party—California's first.

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