



TWENTY MILES FROM A MATCH

HOMESTEADING IN WESTERN NEVADA

SARAH E. OLDS

FOREWORD BY LESLIE OLDS ZURFLUH

Sarah Elizabeth Olds was born in Iowa in 1875, the youngest daughter in a family of ten. Her father, Alexander Thompson, had migrated from Scotland to Canada where he met and married Mary Anne Harper, a recent migrant from Ireland. They settled on a farm near Ottumwa, Iowa.

Spurred by tales of her brother's adventures, Sarah moved to California in 1897, settling in the town of Stent, some eight miles southwest of Sonora.

There she met and married Albert J. Olds, a miner and a member of a distinguished California family. In 1908, after living in Reno for two years, the family moved to a desert homestead about thirty miles north of town.

In 1931 the family moved back to Reno, where Albert soon died. Sarah, her later years devoted to traveling and revising this account of her Nevada homestead, died in 1963, at the age of 88.

Foreword

The buildings are gone now, burned in the brush fires of the 1970s, and the pastures of the homestead have been absorbed by the neighboring ranch. The driving spirit of the place had moved on before that, so it was just another deserted place by then. Sarah E. Olds had gone on to other interests and finally at 88 to her well-earned rest, having attained her goals of educating her six children without help from outside, and incidentally enjoying life immensely in the process.

LESLIE OLDS ZURFLUH
FERNLEY, NEVADA

APRIL 1978

Eleven

School was to start November first, and the next two weeks were busy ones for me. There was a good deal of housecleaning to do, besides the making of new little dresses and shirts. Our new teacher arrived, and I had picked another winner. I think someone ought to write an ode to country school teachers. They're in a class by themselves. Ours were always so willing to help on any of my propositions, from helping the neighbors dig potatoes, to helping the children drive the steers to town. No matter how hard the work, they always considered it a lark.

We had no trouble keeping teachers through the year, for one of the cowboys was always there when school let out to take her for a grand gallop through the hills.

In the fall of the year we always had a scourge of wood rats. One big fellow, a forerunner of the rest of the tribe, had arrived early and began to gnaw a hole in our house. He was a bold one, and you could look out in the yard at any time of the day and see him trotting around.

The dogs would have nothing to do with him, for they feared those sharp, protruding teeth. They arched their backs, the ruffs of their necks bristling, but they stayed at a safe distance. For days I had been after Daddy and Edson to kill this rat, for once they come, they're there to stay, and you have to kill them to be rid of them. We'd taken down the screens, and the windows were open day and night. The rat could have come in the window at any time, but he chose to sit on a narrow window ledge above the bedroom window and gnaw a hole through the wall to gain entry.

One night he was exceptionally industrious, and about twelve o'clock I became so annoyed at his gnawing that I couldn't stand it any longer. I decided I could kill that wood rat with the broom. I crept out of bed in my nightgown and bare feet, quietly tiptoeing to the kitchen for the broom. I came back and leaned out the window. Sure enough, as I looked up, there he was, chewing away.

I whammed at him with the broom again and again, but he could dodge the blows with the greatest of ease, never missing a gnaw. Finally with a well aimed stroke, I hit him, knocking him off his perch. He fell across my face r.s he hurtled down. I screamed in revul-

sion. Then as I looked down, the animal fairly bounced as he hit and ran back up the wall to his narrow window ledge, going on with his work, as though he had never been interrupted. I struck at him again and again, laughing all the time. At last I was able to connect again with a good hard blow, and this time he fell squarely in my face, and my, how I screamed!

Daddy and Edson had been awakened by all this commotion, and hearing me laughing one moment and screaming the next, they could come to only one conclusion. Now they were at my side, one on the right, the other on the left.

Daddy had been expecting me to collapse mentally or physically from the hard work I was doing, and now he thought my mind was gone for sure. He stood there gently stroking my face saying, "Dear old lady! Poor old lady! Gone at last! Just too much damned hard work."

Edson on the other side of me was shaking me as hard as he could by the shoulders saying, "Talk to us, Ma! Say something. Tell us you're not crazy!"

There I stood between the two of them, laughing so hard I couldn't talk. Between peals of laughter, I'd squeak out, "I'm all right! I'm all right!" But they were so sure I was crazy neither of them would believe me. Finally I straight-

ened up and shoved each one of them away from me. Holding them at arms' length I said, "Now listen to me! I'm not crazy. I'm just having a try at killing that rat that I've been after you fellows to kill for days. Now go on back to bed. I'm all right!"

They both returned to bed, mumbling. I heard Daddy saying, "Well, old lady, you're damn near crazy!" He'd been caught showing a little affection that he didn't like to express, and he was disgusted over it.

Edson was muttering, "Gee whiz, Ma, don't ever do that to us again. Wake us up first, and tell us you're not nuts."

The next day Daddy killed the rat.

Chapter 11 continues.

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Things went along smoothly all that year, and before we knew it the summer of 1913 was upon us. That summer should go down in Nevada history as the year of the great cloudbursts. There were numerous cloudbursts all over the state. One in Pershing County completely wiped out a little tent town called Seven Troughs, killing two men. Another at the foot of Geiger Grade, where my husband's sister lived, had caused them to rush to the safety of the high hills, where they watched the debris and sagebrush float over the top of their house. We had one just four miles from home in the Milk Ranch Canyon. That one washed away the Mateo Ranch barn with a stallion tied in it.

About this time I had to make a trip to town for supplies. Daddy was very uneasy about my going and made me promise to start home early, as the cloudbursts had all come in the afternoon. I made the trip, bought my supplies, and had them tied down tight with the wagon

canvas. That morning I started home way before daylight. I was on the old upper road near Stormy Canyon fifteen miles from town when the black clouds came sailing toward each other from the east and west. I was scared and watching them closely. It surely looked like a cloudburst to me. The clouds were black, the lightning bright, the thunder loud, and then a terrible wind began to blow with cyclone force.

Now I was really frightened. I had a heavy load on the wagon. I stood up with one foot on the dashboard, one foot in the bed of the wagon, and began to scream and hit old Johnny with every step. Then the rain began to pour down, and the wind continued its terrific gale. I heard a terrible roar, which I knew could be nothing but the side of the mountain coming down. I looked back and besides all the roar, wind, and thunder I saw something else to frighten me even more. A perfect wall of water—you could call it nothing else—was bearing down upon me. It was fast coming my way, though it hadn't reached me as yet. I had poor Johnny at a dead gallop, but I kept screaming and striking him with my whip. I was simply out of my mind with fear. Each time I looked back the wall of water seemed nearer to me. I ran the old horse six miles just barely keeping ahead of the ad-

vancing storm.

Then we struck Bacon Rind Flat and Johnny's feet went out from under him. I was not over my fright, but I knew we could run no further. Then my sense of humor came uppermost, and I thought of a funny story about a little school boy. His teacher had given him a problem in arithmetic for homework. The problem was this: A cat had fallen into a well. It gave the dimensions of the well. If the cat jumped up two feet and fell back eighteen inches, and so on to the top, how many jumps would it take the cat to get to the top. Little Tommy was working hard but getting his figures reversed. At last his father said, "Come, Tommy. It's bedtime."

Tommy looked up sleepily and said, "Dad, I'd just as well go to bed. If I work any longer here I'll have that cat in hell!"

This was something like my present problem. We were traveling upgrade when Johnny had lost his footing. Now if we made any progress at all it would be backwards toward that storm. And although the roar had stopped the wall of water was still advancing my way. I jumped out of the wagon and helped Johnny up. I had run the poor old fellow nearly to death. He was breathing hard, and his sides were heaving. It was a terrible situation. We were twenty

miles from a human being in the midst of the storm. I put my arms around Johnny's neck and pressed my face close to his. I felt sorry to think I'd run him so hard, beating him with the whip. I said, "God forgive me for beating my poor old horse. And forgive me, Johnny, I didn't intend to be so mean." I stood there hugging him, looking the situation over, and talking aloud to Johnny. It was a great comfort to have something alive that I could be close to.

We were out on a broad flat with several miles between us and the hills. It would have to be a regular Noah's Ark flood to do us any harm. I don't know how long I stood there with my arms around Johnny's neck, watching the cloudburst. Miraculously, as I watched, it slowly turned and passed away toward the east, leaving us unharmed, but thoroughly drenched.

I was hours getting across Bacon Rind Flat, so called because it is greasy and slippery when wet. When Johnny would get frightened at all the slipping and sliding I would jump out and go around to his head, put my arms around him, and talk to him, which seemed to calm him. Many times in the two-mile trek across the flat we had to stop and rest. From there on home it was good going. Everyone was anxiously awaiting us when we got home, for there

had been a small cloudburst down our own canyon.

On my next trip to town, I saw that the roar had been, as I thought, a part of the mountain washing down. Boulders, weighing tons, had been bobbed around like corks. Had I been ten minutes later, I wouldn't be telling my story.

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