

[Mrs. Ella Davidson]

Interview

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2/18/38 (Billy the Kid Story)

MRS. ELLA (BOLTON) DAVIDSON

DAUGHTER OF FRONTIER ARMY-MAN

PIONEER WIFE AND MOTHER.

Mrs. Ella Bolton Davidson, is one of the few living pioneer women, who experienced all the hardships and dangers of the first years of settlement of the new country of Southeast New Mexico.

Mrs. Davidson, as a child, lived in Fort Stanton, New Mexico, an army post, where she was constantly surrounded by danger from Indians, and where she had few educational advantages. Later, as a woman she lived the hard life of a pioneer's wife and became a typical pioneer mother, when unattended by a physician her second child, a little girl, was born. She made a happy home for her family, in which she ruled with gentleness and kindness, and graciously welcomed the stranger and newcomer as well as her friends.

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Wherever she has lived she quietly became one of the leaders in all cultural and educational [movements?] instituted for the improvement and enjoyment of the town's people. C18 [??] N. Mex.

In 1871, when six years of age Ella Bolton and her mother Ella (Doyel) Bolton and a brother and older sister - who is Mrs. Amelia Bolton Church - came to America from their native town and country, Wexford, Ireland. They joined their husband 2 and father, John Bolton, at Fort Stanton, New Mexico. Mr. Bolton had preceded his family in coming to the United States and was head of the Government Commissary Department at Fort Stanton, which was an army post maintained for protection of the early New Mexico settlers from the hostile Mescalero and Apache Indians.

After the voyage from Ireland, on landing in New York, the Bolton family continued their journey to New Mexico, by rail. They traveled as far as the railroad went, in the state of Kansas, where they were met at the end of the railroad by a military escort sent from Fort Stanton, for their protection from Indians during the remainder of their journey overland thro'ugh the hostile Indian infested country of Kansas, Colorado and part of New Mexico thro'ugh which they were to travel. An army post ambulance was sent in which Mrs. Bolton and the children rode. While the soldiers rode in three covered wagons.

They were allowed to make only thirty miles a day and were required to make camp at Government Army Posts, stationed along the route. At night the wagons and ambulance were place in a circle in which the mules, used for their conveyances, were confined where they could be watched and guarded from Indian raids.

There were no Indian attacks, and no Indians were seen on their entire journey, tho'ugh there may have been some hidden in many places who dared not attack the well armed soldiers who were constantly on the alert.

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The ambulance was, comparatively speaking, easy riding, but the slow traveling had become monotonous and uninteresting long before the three weeks time taken for the journey had passed. They saw no houses or human beings for hundreds of miles in some districts, except the soldiers at the army stations.

The children becoming restless and adventuresome, on the frequent stops, would wander short distances from the wagons. On one occasion while gathering little stones, (found on mounds made by ants,) which they put in little tobacco sacks, discarded by the soldiers, they were suddenly running and screaming from the pain of many ant stings. This becoming an experience of the journey, they never forgot. Also red chili peppers called "New Mexico fruit" by a Mexican who presented some to the children when bitten into by them, became another experience of childish importance, as the one of the stinging ants, and likewise was never forgotten.

The original Fort Stanton, of flimsy construction, established in 1855 on the site now occupied by the Government Marine Hospital was purposely established on Indian hunting grounds between the White Mountains and El Capitan, and was built in a strategic flat stretch of land from which Indian activities could be under observation. Many raids and massacres were headed off and prevented by the alert attention of the army officers.

The fort was named for Captain Henry W. Stanton, First Dragoons, who was killed January 19, 1855, sixty-six miles southwest of Roswell, on the Penasco River in the Sacramento Mountains near the old home site of J. F. Hinkle, former Governor of New Mexico.

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As an army post the fort was abandoned in 1861, was again occupied by the army in 1863 and substantial stone and brick buildings and other improvements for defense, were constructed in 1868.

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In this reconstructed fort John Bolton, after the arrival of his family in 1871, built their adobe house and here, in this, her first New Mexico home, Ella Bolton with her parents and her sister and brother spent three of her early childhood years.

Fort Stanton was again abandoned as an army post in 1896 and since 1899 it has been continuously occupied as a Government sanatorium.

In 1873 John Bolton moved his family to Lincoln, New Mexico where he was made postmaster, and here Ella Bolton, nearly ten years of age, and her sister Amelia two years older grew to young girlhood. They entered into the social life of the town, and with their youthful grace and charm contributed to the pleasure of the social gatherings of the harassed people of bullet scarred Old Lincoln during the "Lincoln County War" of 1876-79. "Billy the Kid", famous outlaw of that region, (who was one of the leaders of the gang of the Alexander A. McSween adherents, against the Major Lawrence G. Murphy followers) contributed a large share to the destruction and murdering that resulted thro'ugh the many encounters of that famous cattle war.

Ella Bolton met the young desperado at a dancing party 5 given by a woman hostess who shared the belief of many others, that "the Kid" had been led into evil paths, and thro'ugh kindness and friendliness of hospitality might be led back into the "straight and narrow way". Billy the Kid tho'roughly enjoyed the party and the occasion of his dancing with Ella Bolton until in his exuberance of enjoyment of the dance, he lifted her and lightly swung her off her feet. The Then he who had boasted of conquests and murderings of numerous big strong man, was made ashamed when he was left on the dance floor, where he stood in confusion, vanquished by a small young girl.

On April 1, 1878 Major William Brady, Sheriff of Lincoln County was fired upon and killed by the McSween partisans, among them "Billy the Kid". The gang lay in wait, concealed by an adobe wall, until Sheriff Brady should walk by after having gone thro'ugh the motion of dismissing court, that because of threats of shooting and murdering had never convened.

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On hearing the shots that killed Sheriff Brady and Deputy Sheriff George Hindman who was one of three men who accompanied him (the other two were not shot) the Lincoln school master became excited and dismissed the school children who walked to their homes in danger of being shot by any of the throngs of armed men, who wrought to a high tension of excitement, would have shot to kill on any slight excuse.

The bodies of Brady and Hindman, no one dared remove, still lay in the street when the school children passed and Ella Bolton, among them, realized then that the slender grey-eyed youth, she knew as William Bonney, was possessed of a 6 passion for murdering and destruction.

The story as an eye witness of parts of the final bloody battle that practically ended the Lincoln County War is best given in Mrs. Davidson's own words:

“Lincoln became an armed battle ground after the killing of Ollinger and Bell (the Kid's guards) when he made his escape from the Lincoln jail where he had been confined since his capture after the slaying of Brady and Hindman.

“On the Sunday evening before the terrible days that ended the Lincoln County War Mother said: ‘Ella this is the week that will end all this bloodshed and fighting and, I thank God your father is away and won't be mixed up in the shooting, but I am afraid to stay here with you children unprotected.’ So that night after supper she took us to stay with the Ellis family, in their house which was built with all the rooms in one long row. About ten o'clock we heard someone with spurs on, come clattering down the whole length of the house. The door where we sat opened and there was Billy the Kid! He was followed by fourteen men who took possession of the house. We went back to our home but Mother was afraid to stay there after she thought our water supply would perhaps be cut off, so we went to Juan Patron's house and about midnight that house was taken over by some of the fighters. We then went to Montonna's store where we went to bed and when we got up the next morning about twenty men had taken possession there, but we stayed there from

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Sunday evening, until the next Friday morning. Mother got up and after we saw men fired on and one killed, she said 'I am going to take you children out of this danger.

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So she took us two miles out of town [to?] where there were some tall poplar trees - they are still there - and about noon we saw heavy smoke. It was the McSween store that had been set afire by the Murphy men to burn out the McSween men (one of them was the Kid) who were surrounded, so they couldn't escape. When the fire was under way Mr. McSween calmly walked to the door as if surrendering and was shot down. Then, two others that followed were riddled with bullets. George Coe Henry Brown and Charlie Bowdre were among the crowd that escaped. Billy the Kid was the last one left in the building. During the excitement of the roof crashing in, he rushed out with two pistols blazing. Bob Beckwith whose shot had killed McSween was killed by one flying bullet and two others were wounded. The Kid, with bullets whizzing all around him, made his escape.

"After this battle that took place in July, 1878 everything quieted down, and my mother took us home. Mrs. McSween whose home was burned, stayed with us all night, and the next morning she asked me to go with her to see the ruins of her house. We found only the springs and other wires of her piano that was the pride of her life.

"She raked in the ashes where her bureau had stood and found her locket,

"That was the most destructive battle of the Lincoln County War. We were terribly upset with all the fighting and killings. My sister Amelia had more than she could stand so my mother sent her to a ranch until things could settle down.

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"We moved to the Block Ranch in 1879 and my father engaged in ranching. Indians made a raid one night while the ranch hands were away with all the ammunition. My father who was the only man on the place found four gun shells, that these he fired, thinking to

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frighten the Indians, who were not to be scared off. They drove away eighty horses. I spent all of the time of the raid shaking with fright, hidden under the bed.

“We moved to White Oaks in 1830, where I was married in 1883 to Syrus L. Cyrus Leland Davidson. We had two children, a boy named Syrus Cyrus for his father who was born in 1884 in White Oaks. Millie, our daughter was born in 1886 in Picacho where there was no physician to be had for attendance of her birth. We moved to Roswell in 1898.”

Mrs. Davidson, who is the only surviving member of her immediate family, makes her home with her sister Mrs. Amelia Church in Roswell. She is a member of the Chaves County Archaeological and Historical Society and is a member of St. Andrews Episcopal Church, of which she was one of the organizers and hard workers for the church fund when the church was built in 1899. She also was one of the guild workers who gave a turkey dinner to raise the money with which three dozen kitchen chairs were bought for seats for the church.

After having lived in New Mexico, under nerve breaking conditions and rough surroundings, for over half an average life time, Mrs. Davidson, at the present time shows no ravages of those times of her hard past life.

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She is small in height and slenderly built, and has calm kind eyes and a placid countenance. There are no signs of strain or nervousness (in her quiet manner of bearing) that one usually finds in those who have lived under the strain of harrowing experiences.

She receives her friends in a quiet restful atmosphere, where she has all the comforts and beauty of surroundings of a modern home, that the pioneer, during the days of settlement, never believed one would be able to obtain and enjoy in New Mexico.

Source of Information

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Mrs. Ella Bolton Davidson

Roswell, New Mexico