

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 17 | Issue 1

Article 12

1947

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Recommended Citation

Summers, Richard. "Oldest Inhabitant." *New Mexico Quarterly* 17, 1 (1947). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol17/iss1/12>

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OLDEST INHABITANT

Richard Summers

IN THE EARLY MORNINGS the sunlight was frolicsome in Molly Jefferson's room. It fell in irregular patterns across the patchwork quilt which many years ago she had sewed for her hope chest. The patches of light and shadow seemed to shiver as the wind rippled the leaves of the trees outside her window. With a bony, thick-knuckled finger Molly traced the outlines of the patterns, not moving any other part of her body.

From where she lay she could see the line of trees planted by her father along the irrigation ditch. They were very old now, wrinkled and gnarled and calloused, the old branches meeting across the road in a sheltering canopy. Here and there were empty spaces, showing the rugged shoulders of the hills and mountains piled up beyond. There was something sad in these empty spaces, in the death of old trees, Molly thought, for it implied the death of the spirit that had planted them, a barrier against the wild desert. Molly looked at the beauty of the trees and not at the empty spaces.

She was almost glad for the weakness that kept her lying helpless, if she could just forget those peaches and the extra burden on her granddaughter Patricia. It was good to be waited on, to have Patricia or her husband Jacob rub her back with alcohol in return for the hundreds of backs that she had rubbed in her time as a midwife and nurse when the closest doctor was sixty miles away. She almost liked her feeling of indolent weakness when they brought a steaming bowl of soup to her, though usually she was unable to eat it.

She lay and waited to grow better, and let her thoughts drift. The only thing she really disliked was having no control of herself. Often Jacob must be hustled out of the room without knowing the reason, while Patricia pulled off the soiled sheets and put on fresh, clean ones.

That nasty worm or bug or animal, whatever it was, gnawing at her insides, had no consideration for a lady's modesty.

Sometimes in morphine stupor, without knowing whether she was asleep or awake, she had waking dreams, memories of her youth, of the life she had lived as far back as her memory would take her. Her fancy skipped about everywhere, leaping twenty years in a moment. If only it weren't for the peaches, she could thoroughly enjoy the stories her mind recalled. They took her along the path of the West, from dough-gods to radios, from red-bellies to Japs.

Wagons out of Utah, slow, crackling wagons unwinding into the far territory of Arizona that exists only in the family talk. Molly's father in the lead wagon—tall, strapping, bearded six-foot-one James Mallory, with a strong face under a hard hat.

Molly rides in the second wagon with her mother. Lustrous-eyed, excited, eleven years old. She sees her mother plain in memory: a dainty, frail woman always tired. Always tired. Pretty and frail and always tired. Molly gets her strength from her father. Mother there in the second wagon leaning over so the baby can suckle at the same time she holds the reins. Molly hears the baby champ and sucking on mother's nipple and wonders if it hurts as bad as it sounds. She sees the tiny white breast, too small to hold enough milk for baby. There was the baby that died during the first long winter.

Behind the wagon, sheep and cattle stringing out, with a dull-witted Mexican boy herding them along, swearing at them in Spanish. Or sometimes he rides close and tries to flirt with Molly, who stares back owlishly, refusing a reply to his banter.

Wagons creeping slow into the gulf of the sky that opens out forever. Wagons moving up hill, slipping and floundering and sometimes bogging down in the deep sand of the arroyos. The world is painted in gaudy, unnatural colors—reds and grays and yellows. The empty sky is like a big blue cap.

This is dangerous Indian territory in 1880. Utes and Paiutes, Navahos and Apaches roaming the desert for a kill. Grown-ups talk in whispers of the danger, voices low so the children won't hear, but the children understand the tone of the voices and know what is being talked about. Fear makes them feel sick.

Wild awesome country that moves on forever, unwinding under the wagons. Down from Utah. God has sent his Latter Day Saints to

make a new home. The leaders of the church have listened to God and called this family and that from their homes, called upon them to go south and settle in Arizona. There is no choice but to pack up and leave, loading their wagons too heavy with all the paraphernalia: clothing and bedding and the cook stove that is still in Molly's kitchen after all these years. Horsehair trunks, packing boxes and crates, empty bottles and preserves put down in clay jars. Gunny sacks of dried corn and jerky and dried frijoles. Live chickens and rabbits in crates with slats nailed across the top. Many crawling children that upset things in the wagons.

Wagons down from Utah into a fantastic upheaval of rainbow-hued canyons and odd mountains of cream and rose and orange and blue, cliffs and buttes swimming about in the hot air, seeming to jerk as though nervous in the heat.

From St. George and Provo and Escalante, from Cedar City, Mt. Pleasant, and Price, the people emigrate in small bunches to extend the faith of their fathers into the unknown wastes of Arizona. They will build Sunset City, Brigham, St. Joseph; they will build Snowflake and Thatcher and Safford and St. Johns and St. David. They will build towns with no other resource than the strength in their hands and the faith in their hearts. God commands.

At night the wild dogs and coyotes patter about the camp snuffing for food, or they gather at a distance and complain in a chorus of their hunger.

A band of Indians rides up on scrawny ponies, glossy with sweat. The Indians ask for handouts of tobacco. The children peek out from the wagon and notice how dirty and greasy the Indians look, or they hide their faces in the blankets and tremble with fear. Father speaks to the Lamanites a few words about God and his goodness and his authority; they shake their heads, not understanding. They grin at Father's earnestness. He loses none of his tranquillity. He raises his hands and in a loud voice prays over them. They watch starry-eyed like children and decide he must be a medicine man. Though they are painted for war, they hold to peace. When he gives them each a handful of tobacco they ride away contented.

Father explains that the Lamanites are simple folk, with brotherly love in their hearts.

Into the nighttime the wagons roll, under the moon. The campfires are scarlet eyes that wink and wink, and the moon winks back

through pungent smoke. The children's whimpering dies out into the mystery of sleep. A great silence shouts loud of God.

Big James Mallory is not satisfied with their lot in Brigham City, not willing to lend all his toil to the commonweal, then watch his own family starve on half rations. The United Order, in practice here, is a social experiment that has failed.

Three families on the move again—south. Wagons on the move, seeking a place less sterile. Wagons rolling into the Apache country, which it is death to settle in, but big Jim Mallory unafraid. Bottoms sore from days on the springless board seats. Horses laboring sweatily upgrade into the timber country against weight of wagons too heavily loaded. It's Mother's fault. She wanted to bring along everything; she couldn't bear to leave this or that behind, finding a mite of security in surrounding herself with familiar possessions.

Here is a new place. Here the river bends and flows steady, and the pine trees fringe the valley almost to the edge of the river. Here a dam can be built, the flat banks cultivated. Wagons stop moving, their wheels pinioned with rocks. The three families begin to settle. They have no thought of being pioneers. They only want a place to shelter their heads and land to grow their crops.

Winter swirls in blizzards against the thin canvas of the wagons. The wind bellies out the canvas and snaps it back with loud reports. In the voices of the wind the children hear the bloodthirsty yells of Apache warriors.

Log houses sprout from the earth. But the work is slow and tedious and the winter settling down in earnest. It is too cold here, much colder than they had expected. In the morning their joints are solidified with cold. Molly is convinced that she can never move again. But work must be done. Joints must be made to move. It is like the peaches that will rot unless you tend to them.

No more good wheat bread for the children. Just barley bread raised with soda and sour milk. The women grind the barley into barley flour in hand coffee-grinders and bake the bread in their stoves out-of-doors. It is soggy and heavy and brown, hard to eat. You have to pull the beards out of it first or they will stick in your throat and tickle all day.

A winter too long, dragging the hours into tedious days, with new work to be done when the old is ended. The baby dies. Baby buried

under the tall pine tree that points straight upward toward heaven like a finger. James Mallory says at the end of the prayer, after the frozen ground is packed over the baby, "That tree is a pretty marker for him."

The cattle huddle together in the shelter of the trees, nuzzling away the snow to get at the frozen grass. Some of the cattle freeze. Then the men cut the carcasses into meat and all have meat a while. The meat that's left is hung on catch ropes slung over high branches of the pine trees, thirty feet above the ground, out of reach of animals and flies.

In the spring, wagons on the move again southward to an easier and warmer place. The Mallory family stops at Obed, and here they live the rest of their lives. Here Father plants the trees that grow big and reach across the road and die.

Clearing fields, building a dam, planting crops. Molly learning to plow when she is twelve, learning to make a straight furrow with the big sulky plow. No boy in the Mallory family, so she must learn to do the plowing. Father, grinning, says, "You make a fine boy, Molly. You're my boy. You make a better hand than most men I know."

Memories of nighttime terror to stay always with those that were children then. At dusk the eerie sounds beginning—yapping of coyotes and howls of the lobos, nearer at hand the sputtering and squeaking of small animals. Turkeys gobbling under the shoulders of the hills. Every sight, every sound in the darkness, is to the children an Apache Indian.

Children going to sleep only because they can no longer stay awake, expecting to be roused by whooping death.

Plowing, hoeing, heavy work for Molly all her life long. In the saddle handling cattle—wild longhorned cattle in those days, hard to handle. Then into the kitchen for more work. Work always, work that must be done today, for tomorrow may be too late, the cream too sour, the fruit too ripe, the vegetables rotted, the rain too early or too late. Like those peaches. But the work is pleasant because you know you have done your duty in a satisfying way, and God loves you for it.

"Yes, sir," says James Mallory. "Too bad you wasn't born a boy, Molly, you the oldest."

Mother sick, and father up to Tucson to see about some calves.

Mother got a headache awful bad. Frail Mother that looks more like a helpless little girl than Molly, who is glad she takes after her father and is strong as a horse. It is night, the wild dogs stir up a rumpus off somewhere up toward the mountains and start the baby to crying.

Mother sick and telling Molly what to do. Vinegar, boil it till it's hot, and sprinkle a little pepper into it and put it on my head. And make me some poultices out of corn meal and put them on the soles of my feet and the back of my neck. Plenty of mustard. Mustard to draw out the poisons and the pain. Plenty of mustard. She always remembers all her life when making poultices. I'll sleep now, child.

I'd sleep now too, little mother, only the peaches. . . .

And then it's one of the younger children gagging with the croup like it would die. Tincture of lobelia does it, the seeds cut with whiskey and stirred into olive oil.

I'll sleep now too, little mother. Frail and pretty mother, like a child.

Corn must be planted today because the moon's right. Work in the warm wet fields barefooted and squish the soft mud through your toes. The cold mud feels good on your feet with the sun so hot. Work like a man in the fields. You're supposed to be a man anyhow.

Mormon dance. Girls in white shirt-waists stiffly starched, and the girls look starchy and prim too, but behind their demure eyes they have strong feelings that bloom like red flowers in their cheeks so that they don't need rouge. Their feelings the same as the girls' nowadays. No different. But they don't paint themselves up fit to kill and ruin their soft complexions. What girls have always needed for their skins is good soap and water and plenty of it.

The girls dress neat and plain without make-up, but their cheeks are red and their lips bitten red, and their hair twisted up in teapot style, bunched on the top of the head in a roll. Hair so long when it's let out it falls like a river down their backs. Molly's hair down below her waist when it's undone. Hard to believe now because it's so thin. It is fun to brush out the long hair and let it trickle over your hands, and the brushing makes it crackle with electricity.

Mother at the dance, sitting with the other mothers on the benches. Folks come in rigs and wagons and buggies and sleds from miles around. It doesn't seem too much bother to drive a buggy ten miles to a dance at the schoolhouse and then dance on rough pine boards. From the

looks of the sky at sunset they may have to drive home through the snow.

Mothers watch the boys with hawk-eyes. Floor manager watches too. No hugging the girls. No grabbing them by the belt instead of by the hands. No close-in dancing. It's difficult to sneak anything over on the floor manager and the mothers.

Fiddler hollers, "Swing your partners. All men right. All men right." Stamps his foot in time to the music. Everybody stamping. The pine floor jiggling with all the stamping and the good time.

Jacob dances with Molly. She doesn't know him very well. Only seen him twice before. He's eager when he talks to her, and he looks handsome and he looks older. He's been all over. Down to old Mexico he has a gold mine. Jacob dancing with her and making her voiceless. She can't help it even though he isn't a Mormon and stodgy Ralph Goodman is. Jacob has her by the belt, and the strings lead up to her heart.

Floor manager spots him, so he quits. But it's too late. Floor manager coming over and ruling him off the floor for the evening.

Dancing goes on, lively music and the stamping, lively music and the whirling. Jacob standing near the doorway and trying to catch her eye, and when she sees him Molly coloring up and tossing her head saucily to show him she doesn't like what he did and never wants to see him again. But she does, really, and she knows it.

Jacob holds the baby like a vase that might break. It's the first baby, Daniel, the boy that died when he was sixteen. Jacob holding Daniel away from him for fear he'll squeeze him too tight and squash him.

Daniel dead. Daniel looks beautiful dead. Death is sweet sometimes when it comes like sleep to quiet the trembling and the agony. Daniel looks beautiful dead.

I want to sleep now too, little mother. Oldest inhabitant. Seventy-seven is old enough. Last pioneer of Obed. But the peaches will rot. I'll be up and around tomorrow, sure as the sun rises.

Jacob lulled himself with motion, half asleep in the rocker on the front porch. The day eased itself off westward, and the thick purple twilight moved in, creeping down beneath the big trees. Insects hummed in a racket along the ditch. The neighbor's dog across the road yapped at a passing car.

Jacob felt contented sitting here, even with Molly sick, because she was so peaceful, almost happy, and did not seem in much pain. Nice, sitting on the porch, resting the ache and sag of old muscles after hoeing all day. Nice just to sit on one's seat and take the load off one's muscles. Jacob maintained that he'd be working a full shift each day up to the moment of his death. He'd always been strong and healthy. But tonight he wasn't so sure. He felt weary and old. He'd be glad, maybe, when Patricia married that big blond Hunter boy and brought him here to live and help with the work. It was planned so as soon as Molly was better. But she was very sick. The doctor said she could not live.

Jacob dozed. He roused to see Molly sitting beside him, rocking gently back and forth. It must be Molly. That red gingham dress she often put on at supper time, same figure, same face. The light was dim, but Jacob could not be mistaken. Molly sitting there, when she was too weak to get out of bed.

Now he knew. ~~This was her ghost or spirit~~ sitting here to comfort him, to speak a last word to him before she went away. Molly must have died quietly in the room yonder, and this was her spirit. It was true, after all—heaven and angels and spirits and things. Here sitting beside him was Molly's spirit. Jacob swallowed heavily on too-dry saliva.

"Molly!" he spoke in a low voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Grandfather. Did I wake you?" Patricia asked.

"You give me a start. That you, Pat?"

"Of course. Who else could it be?"

"You look a lot like your grandmother in some ways," Jacob said, blinking at her. "And that dress now—"

"Molly gave it to me yesterday."

"Oh," Jacob said. "I thought for a minute you was Molly. It's growing dark is all."

Patricia said, "I'm pretty tired. I thought I'd come out and rest a minute while supper finished cooking. I been canning peaches all day. Got every last one of them put up. But don't you tell grandmother. She has her heart set on putting them up herself."

"I won't tell her," Jacob promised.