



The Beloved House . . .

If you turn the corner by the post office in Independence and walk west toward the mountains you will come immediately to a small cottage set behind a white picket fence. It stands close to the street, as was common a hundred years ago, and is bordered on the east by a stretch of lawn and a few neglected shrubs. Old locust trees, ragged with age, still leaf out in the spring. A plaque beside the door reads: "The oldest house in Inyo County. This house with the two adobe rooms covered with siding dates from the days of Thomas Edwards who came to the Owens River Valley in 1863 and laid out a townsite, naming it Independence. The front rooms of this house were built between 1863 and 1865."

Mr. Edwards built the two front rooms, but his large family never lived here, for in 1865 his wife and younger children returned to their old home at Knights Ferry and he and his two older sons remained in Independence to lay out a townsite on his 160-acre ranch. While Putnam's stone cabin had been the family

home before Mrs. Edwards' departure, evidently her husband had no intention of keeping bachelor quarters there, so the little two-room cottage served as his home-away-from-home when he returned to Independence to attend to the business of selling his town lots.

When Mr. Edwards had no further use for the property he sold it to John Hughes, who was first supervisor for this district after the formation of Inyo County. In 1872 Mr. Hughes added the two "low rooms," the adobe rooms covered with siding, and the original kitchen, which burned in 1886.

Today the house probably looks much the same as it did when Lou Irwin came here as a bride in 1883. Her parents had settled at George's Creek and there her mother died when Lou was only twelve years old. Pioneer rancher John Shepherd and his wife Margaret befriended the little girl and she spent much time in their home. She and Eva Lee Shepherd became fast friends and remained so until Lou's death. Eva Lee said later, "She was my best friend. After her death I was never the same. Part of me was buried with her."

John Irwin had come to Independence from Kentucky in 1876. He bought the saloon where the post office now stands and served as county assessor from 1883 to 1898. In 1883 he married Lucinda Joslyn at George's Creek and brought her to the little honeymoon cottage that was to be their home for the rest of their lives. Those first years were happy ones. John (Larry) Irwin, an early visitor to Independence, although no relative of John Irwin's, wrote, "I don't recall when Johnny Irwin reached Inyo, but believe he led a varied career, including time served in the sheriff's office, before he ran the saloon. He had a reputation for sterling integrity and his wife was the Florence Nightingale of Independence."

Both John and Lou loved their garden. Since he was a Kentuckian, the lawn was pure bluegrass and around it he planted the shrubs he had known as a boy—mock orange and deutzia, flowering almond, bridal wreath and honeysuckle. And those locusts! They were the first in Independence and an early photograph shows the sapling trees marching in front of the saloon, then turning the corner to pass the little cottage. That ghost tree by the front gate was once the largest in the valley, much prized by the Irwins. Lou planted the flowers, every kind imaginable, and this in itself was a wonder in a town where a cleanly swept dooryard was the mark of a good housekeeper.

Meantime Eva Lee Shepherd had married Jack Gunn, miner, gambler and saloon keeper. She and Lou were still "best friends" and as they lived a stone's throw from each other they were constantly together. The town was so small that friendships were important; they were a bulwark against loneliness and the mysterious desertness pressing in on every side.

Because this story is still told in Owens Valley, we must go back to 1878, soon after John Irwin came to Independence. We can picture him as an adventurous young man, the first to volunteer for any hazardous job that promised danger and excitement. One came to hand immediately. A murder was committed in Lone Pine and the murderer holed up in a disreputable resort of that town and refused to surrender. Sheriff Passmore attempted to force an entrance to the building and was killed by a shot from within. Word was sent to Independence and a posse, headed by John Irwin, soon arrived. The murderer and the owner of the place attempted to escape and were cut down by a fusillade of bullets. Other men in the building were allowed to come out and surrender. Among these were two young Mexicans whose only fault seemed to be that they had fallen into bad company. They were given a "floater"

and told never to return to Lone Pine. But, in spite of this order, the posse, carried away with the excitement and tragedy of the evening, followed the fleeing men and killed them near Haiwee. As proof of death the ears of the two men were cut off and the grisly reminders brought back to Independence. The Mexican community of Lone Pine was outraged by this senseless killing, especially since no one of the posse was punished because of it.

When John Irwin became a business and family man he probably thought less and less of that wild night of violence, but, being a man of conscience, he could not forget the death of the two young Mexicans. And Lone Pine did not forget, for when the Irwins' daughter was born she had no outer ears and the Mexican community whispered, "It is God's judgment." John and Lou Irwin lavished all their love and care on little Nettie Lee and concealed her disfigurement by combing her hair softly about her face. Life was never quite as carefree and happy again but Lou had her garden and the little house remained a peaceful oasis in the ugliness that surrounded it.

So the years passed and a new century dawned, a century that was to bring only tragedy to the little family. Nettie Lee, then seventeen years old, fell ill with typhoid and Lou would allow no one else to nurse her. The fever persisted week after weary week and when it finally broke Lou took to her bed, too exhausted to throw off the meningitis that was to destroy her. Her obituary read, "Her garden contained a thousand blossoms planted and tenderly cared for by her own hands." And: "She looketh well to the ways of her household and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed, her husband also and he praiseth her."

Because Nettie Lee was still frail after her long illness, her father sent her to visit an aunt in El Paso, hoping that a milder climate would restore her to perfect health. And there she died—so far from home. John was bereft. In one short year he had lost all that made life worth living and his friends could find no words to comfort him. When death came again to the little cottage Eva Lee said, "He died of a broken heart," and she was the one to know.

John left the saloon and house to Jack Gunn. Eva Lee wrote, "I loved her house the best of all and will love it till I die." Now it was hers, but it was never quite the same without Lou's love and laughter. And there were rumors about the City of Los Angeles—that it planned to drain the Owens River Valley and dry up the ranches. The leading Los Angeles newspaper boasted that sagebrush would grow in the streets of the valley towns and bats take up their habitation in the courthouse. It was an idle boast, but a frightening one. What to do? That was the question for which there seemed to be no answer.

Then, when the valley was prepared to see the desert reclaim its towns, word came out of Los Angeles that the City would buy up town property. People felt they had no choice. For so long they had listened to stories of what the City intended to do to the valley that they persuaded themselves they must sell or lose everything. In this state of confusion and panic many sold homes so dear that money could not compensate for their loss. Among these was Eva Lee. She wrote, "I'll be sorry all my life that I had to give it up."

There are those in Independence who believe that a presence still lingers about this old house, for surely it can never be free of its past—there was too much joy, too much sorrow. So if you

stand outside the fence when purple shadows are moving up the Inyos, when the air is fragrant with honeysuckle and the night moth hovers in the columbine, you may feel a stirring in the garden and see the grass bend down as though footsteps were passing over it. Then, in the dusky quiet, it is easy to believe Lou has never left her Beloved House and that she and Eva Lee still walk together in the cool of the evening as they did when they were young, almost a hundred years ago.

