

# Mary Austin – A Page From History

**A**t the end of a little side street in Independence in Inyo County, California, stands a small frame house under a huge willow tree. Before it is a plaque marking the spot (California Historical Landmark 229) as the home of Mary Austin, and quoting a bit from the preface of her *Land of Little Rain*: "But if ever you come beyond the borders as far as the town that lies in a hill dimple at the foot of Kearsarge, never leave it until you have knocked at the door of the brown house under the willow-tree at the end of the village street, and there you shall have such news of the land, of its trails and what is astir in them, as one lover of it can give to another."

Mrs. Austin has long been she loved, and her eloquent the products of her pen, strong that came to her through this such news ... as one lover of it Perhaps that strength made her that she became. Through it pain, sorrow, and a series of tragedies that would have into the depths of despair; enemies that bore their death. For it is said that when, communities, it was proposed to her memory-a low pool, creature might come to drink- summarily refused.



gone from this place that tongue long stilled. But with the unique strength desert land, still give us can give to another." the controversial woman she conquered physical personal disasters and beaten an ordinary mortal through it she made bitterness long past her in one of the desert that a fountain be erected where even the smallest the town officials

Born in Carlinville, Illinois, September 9, 1868, Mary Hunter-a precocious and non-conforming child from the very beginning-spent most of her first 20 years in that tight-bound midwest community.

Before she was ten, she decided that her life work should be writing; in fact, by then she had started to write. Her interest in nature developed at an early age. When she was but twelve she read the Chautauqua course in geology, and that same year Hugh Miller's geological opus "Old Red Sandstone." Thus inspired, she began to collect fossils, particularly fossil crinoids. She soon, as she said, had a croquet box full, and that was continually being dragged out for other young collectors to gloat over and everybody to stumble upon.

Mary Hunter's interest in the natural sciences lasted throughout her life. In 1888, when her family-then reduced to her mother and two brothers-moved to California and established themselves on a homestead at the far south edge of the San Joaquin Valley, she found country that stirred her strangely. A large part of her time, day and night, she spent out-of-doors, inquiring, observing, and recording for future use the habits of the night-prowling animals, the flux of seasons, the kinds of growing things, the movements of sheep and cattle, the stories of herders, Indians, pioneers-anything and everything that crossed her path. Mostly her mind was filled with questions; and for help in finding the answers, she turned to General Edward F. Beale, owner of Tejon Rancho, who was thoroughly familiar with the land and the sources of information about it, and glad to pass on his knowledge to the quick and intelligent girl.

By the summer of 1889 it was obvious to the Hunters that they would not be able to make the homestead pay. General Beale, as always sympathetic to the problems of homesteaders, offered to let them work Rose Station, the old stage stop just below the Pass, on his Tejon Ranch. Mary spent but little time there, for she was almost immediately engaged to teach at Mountain View dairy ranch.

Here Mary Hunter came into her own. She was an excellent teacher, able not only to stimulate the interest and natural inquisitiveness of her students, but also to win their affection, even their devotion. Here, too, she met Stafford Wallace Austin and became engaged to him. They were married May 18, 1891, at her mother's home, which was then in Bakersfield.



Stafford Austin's goal, at the time he married Mary, was to become a vineyardist; it took him a little less than a year to lose that hope. Next, he and his brother Frank set up on irrigation project for the Owens Valley, which Stafford was to manage from Lone Pine; and after a short interlude in San Francisco (during which Mary sold her first two short stories) husband and wife took up residence at the Lone Pine hotel.

For several years thereafter Mary struggled to put their lives in order; but matters went from bad to worse. For awhile they settled at George's Creek, north of Lone Pine, where Mr. Austin taught school.

During this period Mary became acquainted with the Indians, going out occasionally to work with the women at their native tasks; learning how to make snares, to weave baskets, and to find the seeds used for food and the plants used for medicine. She renewed her acquaintance with the flocks and herders she had known on the Tejon, and to the latter she brought garden greens and fresh garlic, which she traded for lumps of fresh mutton, and for news of the trail.

The next winter Mr. Austin taught school at Lone Pine, where conditions were somewhat improved; at least the house was better, and his salary a bit larger. She was drawn once more into the company of miners and mining people, the tag ends of the Comstock rush, those "relicts of the great mining days, whose trails went up like smoke even as Mary watched them." She crossed the town's social borders, making friends with its Spanish speaking population, learning from them the art of Mexican cooking and the sound of their soft-flowing language.

So her days went . . . until Mr. Austin took up a homestead in the Alabama Hills. Though she found great beauty in that spot, Mary was not there long, for the life was more taxing than her health could stand, and the strain was a hundredfold increased by her growing suspicion that (their child) Ruth was mentally afflicted. Short of money as always, she went to Bishop, to teach in the Academy there. For the time, Mr. Austin stayed behind.

In 1897, Mr. and Mrs. Austin accepted work as teachers - he as Superintendent - in the Lone Pine school; but once more her health gave out, and she went to Los Angeles. Soon afterward Mr. Austin quit his job and moved to Independence to become Registrar of the Desert Land Office. Mary, not having been consulted, was incensed; but when she could she went to him there.

Another bout with illness sent her to Los Angeles for a year, where she had a chance to meet and talk with other writers for the first time in her career. She would undoubtedly have liked to stay, but Mr. Austin would not leave Inyo, so she returned there, feeling that another year of separation would probably end their marriage.

Perhaps the most magnificent description of California desert country ever to reach print is Mary Austin's book, *The Land of Little Rain*. She said, "I was only a month writing ... but I spent twelve years peeking and prying before I began it." People sought her out-geologists, collectors of Indian artifacts, botanists, explorers, Sierra Club members-because of her knowledge of the land. She was acknowledged an expert on Indian affairs; and no less personage than Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States, sought her opinion on forest lands and grazing.



In the early 1900s Mary, planning her book *Isidro*, took the opportunity to travel to Monterey and do research for it at the Mission of Carmel. There she made the acquaintance of many prominent writers, and with Jack London, George Sterling, and several others, formed the artists' colony at Carmel.

But her time in California was now coming to its end. In 1903 an investigation was started by the National Reclamation Bureau to reclaim and lands in Owens Valley. Individual owners made transfers of rights and privileges, and land was purchased easily by men who claimed to represent the Government. And then the rosy picture exploded. Word got around that the water was instead to be drained from the Valley to supply Los Angeles. Wallace and Mary Austin joined their protests to those of the Valley inhabitants-to no avail. Wallace Austin eventually moved on to Death Valley. Mary Austin resumed her writing-for a time-in Carmel. Ill and depressed, she foresaw nothing but desolation for the County of Inyo, and loving it as she did, had no wish to return there.



She lived 66 full years, years of meeting life head-on, years during which resignation was "never a character written in her book," before her death on August 13, 1934, at her "Beloved House," Casa Querida, in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Excerpts from a story which appeared in *Mineral Information Service*