

Myrtle Matlick Autobiography

Provided by Carol Stephens

[My mother and stepfather] got a [?], when was it? I think about 1916, maybe 1917. He went into business out in the desert in Mojave (California), in business again, and it wasn't a hotel. It was smaller and not much good. We lived in Mojave about two or three years, and I acquired my first real beau there. I was very much in love with him and we were going to be married whenever we were able, and my mother didn't like it. So she promptly went to work to break it up—lies, anything. And she succeeded. I was heart-broken, of course. Have you any idea where Bishop is? It's up in the Owens Valley. In those days, in 1916, that was far away. It was farming country and more or less simple, very simple, more or less primitive in a lot of ways. Mojave was also a railroad junction and there was a narrow gauge railroad that went up to Bishop back then and there was a railroad man in Mojave who worked on that narrow gauge up to Bishop. (The Broad Gauge line, known as the Jawbone Branch, was completed from Mojave, California to Keeler, California in 1910 to expedite delivery of materials for building the Los Angeles aqueduct. The Carson/Colorado Narrow Gauge line then went from Keeler, through Bishop to Mound House, Nevada. The Narrow Gauge line was known as the Slim Princess.) A man, the conductor on the narrow gauge, he went up and back again everyday, and I knew him quite well and, of course, I think a lot of news always went around Mojave, same as it does everywhere, and I was grumbling and grumbling and I said I wanted a job. I wanted to get the hell away from my mother! Because I was mad at her!

Bishop at that time, of course, was a very small village, but there was a hotel. Bishop is in the High Sierras you know. You've heard, deep snow, impassible in the winter. But in Bishop there was a rather small hotel that catered to tourists in the summer for fishing, hunting and, I don't think there was any skiing up there at that time, but it's now more popular in skiing than it was then. It was open only during the summer. Three or four months or so. And, at any rate, he said that in this hotel they had two or three girls waiting on the tables. They had, I think during the winter, they had one aging woman, middle-aged woman. Of course, anyone over 40 was middle-aged there at that time! And so he said it was a nice place and the hotel owner's wife, she kept track of the girls. Well, that comes later. (The Laws Railroad Museum lists three different hotels in Bishop at this time: the Valley View Hotel on Main Street, the Clark Hotel and the Istilia Hotel, which may or may not have been finished at this time. The hotel Myrtle mentions was probably the Clark Hotel, built in 1887. It stood on the west side of North Main and had a dining room and an ice cream parlor. The tobacco shop her future husband, Leroy Matlick, probably worked in was on North Main Street as well.)

At any rate, he said they needed a girl in the dining room and he asked them the next day when he went up, and he told me when he came back that they would be very happy to have me. And I think it was the next day after that probably, maybe the same day, I had packed up my clothes and went up on the narrow gauge, moved into the hotel.

Well, it was nice. It was beautiful up there, of course, and I think there was one other girl. She and I had one room, and another girl who was the owner's daughter, she wasn't always there, whenever she could escape she would, and the older woman in the hotel. And it was quite busy. That was for the fishing and the hunting. No snow.

It was mostly men that came to the hotel, the men in the village. And, among others, I met Leroy [Matlick] and the time came, I think it was maybe the 15th of September or what I don't know, when I'd be out of a job and I was still mad! I didn't want to go home! And about that time Leroy proposed. So I took him! (About 2 weeks after they met.) He had a business at that time, candy and tobacco shop. (The Laws Railroad Museum has information that this shop was probably run by George Neal in 1901 in the Jack Black Building on the corner of N. Main and Line Street in Bishop.) And there were dozens of Matlick's there because when I became Mrs. Matlick, I was the seventh. And I didn't meet any of the rest of them at that time. I went out with him a number of times and, of course, the hotel owner's wife, she watched those girls. And she didn't do a very good job of watching her own daughter. I guess she couldn't. But the other two, myself and the other girl, she insisted that we be in at 10 o'clock at night if you went out with anyone. And she wanted to know who we were going with and, more over, we could not go out with any man driving with a car. We had to stay close to town. The only thing to do was to go to the ice cream shop, (probably the one located in the Clark Hotel), and occasionally a movie. So that was all right. She knew who I was going with and she said "Oh, that's, that's okay, he's a..." I don't remember what she called him, a good person, of course.

They were all Matlicks and they were upper-class Matlicks in that area. They were "top hole." There were brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins and all their children. They were living up there. They were all ranchers. The back country. So, Lee proposed my marrying him and the day he picked was Labor Day in September because the shop was closed Sunday and Labor Day and to be married we had to go to Independence, which was about 60 or more miles away down the Valley. That was the county seat. So we drove down there Sunday, were married, stayed down there over night and drove back the next day to Bishop. And that was that.

I met all the Matlicks up there and after that, I don't know how soon it was, but it was fairly soon that my mother came up to see what I had done. She would have liked to have had a hand in it, but she didn't. And so, it was all right. She accepted the fact, but she met some of the Matlicks, several of them, especially his parents and his two sisters who lived there. And they were appalled when they met my mother. And the reason was, of course, that when they first laid eyes on her that was a shock. They were all country people, innocent and backward. They were educated, of course, well enough. But they'd spent too much of their lives in that primitive country up there. A good many of them were born and raised there. And so I don't know how, Mother didn't meet all of them, of course, but his immediate family and they were distinctly upset because my mother was from a sophisticated, modern world and they weren't. [And also she carried some of the glamour of the stage with her.] That's the trouble right there because those people, particularity all the

Matlicks, when a woman married she took a back seat. She wore dark simple clothes and long skirts to her feet and clod-hopper shoes and she was stuck in the kitchen, knew nothing else. And went to church regularly on Sunday. They were religious, good Methodists.

And when they got one look at my mother—in the first place, she had fashionable clothes on; silk stockings, high-heeled shoes, diamonds on her fingers. I've got one of them. And more than that, she also had cut her hair short, which not many people did in that day, 1916. And, moreover, she dyed it red. In her early life, I thought she was red-headed until I discovered differently. And beyond that she wore paint, powder and lipstick on her face, which was practically unheard of. Now can you think of anything else modern that she didn't represent? They took one look at her. They had accepted me. I wasn't that bad. I wore powder and I had not as flashy clothes. I had modern clothes and high-heeled shoes. I wasn't too different in a way, but they accepted me. In a way they had to.

When we drove back to Bishop from Independence he spent that whole day telling me what he expected of a wife. He kept that a secret. What I had to do and what I should do, what I shouldn't do. Among other things I'd been painting all of my life before that. I must not paint anymore. It was unimportant, silly. And no money in it. And I'd have too much to do as his wife to waste any time painting. I'm not sure that he put it in just those words, but that was the gist of it. That was a blow, that was the first blow right then and there. Because I had intended to be an artist from the cradle.

When I was a small child every older woman that saw me would say, "What are you going to be when you grow up, little girl?" They do that to all children, you know. And I said, "I'm going to be an artist," and they'd look at me and smile and say, "Oh no, you're going to be a momma and have a lot of children," and I said "No I'm not!" Though I had a baby nine months and 10 minutes later! And that's what I was going to be doing, taking care of babies, taking care of the kitchen and behave myself in bed. That's what I gathered out of it. What a life.

Then he told several stories about friends of his who had married, and one in particular her teeth were bad and he didn't know and immediately she was married to him she went to the dentist and ran up a big bill for him. And there were half a dozen similar stories about his friends who married. I think he was just warning me my teeth had better be good and I'd better not get sick!