

## Luzena Stanley Wilson

### *California Gold Fever*

After four months on the road, Luzena Wilson, her husband, Mason, and their two small boys, Jay and Thomas, pulled into Sacramento, California, on the evening of September 30, 1849. Sacramento hummed with the activity of several thousand people, nearly all male. Traffic jams of mules and horses blocked muddy roads to and from the mines and river gullies. Hundreds of tents served as makeshift homes, while even more campfires illuminated where men slept on the ground, rolled up in blankets like so many cocoons.

Shopkeepers bartered and sold behind counters of boards slapped across barrels—each armed with scales to weigh the gold dust men used for currency. Coins were rare; people accepted a pinch of gold dust as a dollar, and everything cost at least one dollar. Luzena purchased a few supplies, including molasses and a slice of salt pork, for the dear price of one dollar each. The pork fizzled down to nothing, old and rotten after traveling around the tip of South America to the California coast. Her flour crawled with black worms, a disheartening sight at the end of the trail.

Luzena quickly learned she could make more money off the gold hopefuls than by mining alongside them. One morning, a man stopped at her outdoor fire. "Madame," he said to Luzena, "I want a good substantial breakfast, cooked by a woman." For five dollars, what seemed a princely sum, she fried two onions, two eggs, and a beefsteak, and boiled a cup of coffee. Afterward she reckoned, "If I had asked ten dollars he would have paid it."<sup>13</sup>

Businesses in the raw mining towns appeared and vanished in a flash. The Wilsons acted quickly. They sold their oxen within a few days and invested in a "hotel," one of the few wooden buildings in town. The place boasted a long living room, the walls stacked floor to ceiling with bunk beds. Here, men lay sick or sleeping, and one man lay dead, forgotten and overlooked. For her own brood, Luzena set up housekeeping in a tent with a dirt floor.

Women were so scarce—Luzena saw only two other women during six months in Sacramento—that men crowded her table, starved for homemade, female cooking. "It was hard work," she wrote, "from daylight till dark . . . hurried all day, and tired out," but her efforts paid off. After a few months, the Wilsons sold their interest in the hotel for \$1,000 in golden dust.

Mason Wilson invested the money in barley, a commodity earning great profits, but misfortune began dogging the family when heavy rains caused the river to flood. Luzena was standing over her fire cooking when she first noticed rivulets trickling across the ground. Then a rush of water swooshed over her feet. She threw Tom and Jay onto the bed and grabbed all the things she could to keep them off the floor.

As the water rose, Luzena carried her boys to the hotel they'd just sold, a structure built three or four feet above the ground. She dumped them inside and hurried to gather more of the family's possessions, including their bedding and the dinner she'd just cooked. She struggled back to the hotel against swirling, knee-deep waters, the force nearly knocking her off her feet.

Within the hour, the whole town was afloat. By midnight, rising water forced the 40 people sheltering in the hotel to the upper floor. There they lived for the next 17 days, in the midst of rain, wind, and water, eating onions and anything they could snag floating by the windows. "Those were days of terror and

fear," Luzena later recalled. They expected the quaking building to tumble into the torrent at any moment.

Sacramento, the Wilson's city of hope, lay in shambles. Sludge, debris, mold, and dead animals covered the town in a shroud of filth. "Our little fortune of barley gone," she wrote, "and I felt that I should never again be safe." The Wilson's tent had vanished, but their stove remained; they set up in the mud, walking over planks to reach the bed. Luzena awoke often during the night and reached down to feel if the water had risen.

With news of a new gold strike at Nevada City, the family decided to try their luck in another place. Without wagon, oxen, or money, they struck a bargain with a teamster to take Luzena, the children, and their few supplies to Nevada City for \$700—Luzena herself was security for the "loan." She promised the man that if she lived, he'd get his pay. The trip of 60 miles took 12 days for there was no road, and the land had soaked up the winter rains and melting snows like a sponge. The little group spent hours digging the mules and wagon out of the mud. The miserable journey ended with a steep descent down a slippery rock face; the oxen locked their forelegs, and the animals and wagon slid a quarter mile down the mountain.

The ravines around Nevada City crawled with men armed with pickaxes and shovels or bent over in the knee-deep icy streams, washing soil from panned bits of gold. The Wilsons arrived covered in mud and too poor to afford a tent. Luzena and Mason cut pine branches and built a shelter. She set up the bedding and placed her stove under a pine tree. "I was established," she recorded, "without further preparation, in my new home."

When Mason left to split wood for a better structure, Luzena set about recouping the family finances. Down the road, she spied a tent with a sign that called the place a hotel, and Luzena

determined to set up a rival establishment. With a few boards and a few stakes, she set up a table, bought provisions, and set to cooking. By the time Mason returned, 20 miners had chowed down at Luzena's makeshift table, each sprinkling a one-dollar pinch of gold dust in her hand as they left.

It seemed everybody around her had money, and the gold dust flowed like water from pockets. Rare fresh fruits and vegetables, even of miserable quality, sold as luxury items. A peach went for \$2, and a watermelon might fetch \$16! Again, miners willingly paid for home-cooked fare, and Luzena's efforts prospered once more. After six weeks, she paid back the \$700 debt for her transportation from Sacramento.

Luzena's business expanded. She'd taken Mason "into partnership," and as the money rolled in, he'd built a house around the brush home and stove. They gradually added on rooms and took in renters who paid \$25 a week. "I became luxurious," recalled Luzena, "and hired a cook and waiters. Maintaining only my position as managing housekeeper, I retired from active business in the kitchen."

The population of Nevada City, also called Coyote Diggins, exploded almost overnight. Luzena's hard work and never-say-die attitude amassed her family nearly \$20,000 invested in the hotel and a small store. With no banks in town, men trusted her with their bags of gold dust, which she stored in milk pans, sometimes going to bed with more than \$200,000 beneath her bed. She also kept a bag for storing money she made doing odd sewing jobs for the miners—a sideline that earned her hundreds of dollars in just a few months.

Luzena's business success paled, however, next to the professional gamblers who preyed on the restless miners always eager to risk their coins or bags of golden dust on a single bet. Thousands of men unleashed in a town filled with saloons and

gambling tables—"they were possessed of the demon of recklessness," recalled Luzena—meant pistols and knives settled disputes and, one night, brought the danger to Luzena's front door.

With Mason away attending court, Luzena sat in her kitchen alone. Suddenly, fists pounded against the walls all around her house and contorted faces pressed against the windows. Cries of "Burn the house!" rent the darkness. Terrified and confused, Luzena opened the door and peaked out at the mob gathered around her hotel. Men shouted, "Search for him!" and "Burn him out!" The sheriff tried to explain that one of her boarders had murdered a gambler in the midst of a card game. Luzena had no choice but to let the mob search her place. The murderer remained undiscovered, and Luzena later learned he'd hidden in plain sight, disguised and standing not 10 feet away from her as part of the mob, watching her terror.

The good days in Nevada City ended abruptly for Luzena after 18 months. Instead of flood, this time fire consumed the town and the Wilsons' security. Warning cries and clanging bells in the night awoke the family, who escaped with nothing but their nightclothes. With everyone else, they stood helplessly while the town burned—the pine buildings were perfect tinder—turning the skies and surrounding forest into a blazing inferno. The imprint of that night, the buildings burning and crashing to the ground, the fire moaning "like a giant in an agony of pain," the smoldering ashes; the stricken faces of the homeless, the realization that her family had lost everything again, overwhelmed Luzena. For the first time her strength failed, "and I fell sick."

The Wilsons turned their backs on Nevada City and returned to the valley near Sacramento once again. They arrived to find a bloody dispute brewing—a squatters war. John Sutter had claimed much of the valley under Spanish land grants, and then

Sutter or his agents had sold off parcels under his grant titles. But the flood of newcomers to California ignored Sutter's grants and often squatted on the lands. The disputes between rival land claimants often turned bloody.

While the Wilsons pondered their next step, they took over an abandoned hotel, a place infested with hundreds of rats. The rodents scurried over the floors and raced from room to room through holes gnawed into the wood. The brazen creatures snapped at Luzena's heels and chewed the legs of the chairs as the family sat in them. At night, Luzena lay their bedding atop tables but couldn't sleep for fear of attacking rodents.

Sacramento had risen from the flood—a host of new brick buildings replaced ramshackle wooden dwellings and tents. Sidewalks protected against mud; actual stores, not just boards plopped across barrels, carried all manner of dry goods, food, and hardware. Civilized Sacramento had a bank, a photographer's shop, and mail delivery by pony express while stagecoaches and steamer ships constantly spewed forth new people. Luzena even attended the theater for a production of *Julius Caesar* at which a singer entertained the crowd during intermissions.

But the undercurrents of gambling, drunkenness, and violence remained, and only a month after the fire, Luzena and her family moved on from Sacramento. They traveled into the foothills, past wild oats and antelopes and elk. After several days, they set up camp near a stream under a canopy of an old oak tree. They slept in a tent made from tree boughs and the canvas covering from their wagon. The area belonged to a Spaniard, a rancher named Manuel Vaca.

Almost penniless again, Mason began cutting the oats and making hay to sell in San Francisco. Luzena once more dug in and began a hotel business, setting up her stove and camp kettle beneath a tree and making a sign that read WILSON'S HOTEL. She

crafted a table from the wagon boards and used stumps and logs for chairs. Guests slept rolled up in bedding beneath a haystack, and for one dollar Luzena provided breakfast.

Once more her hotel prospered, and when the grass got stomped down to dust, she merely moved her stove. A row of nails hammered into tree trunks held her utensils, cups, and a shelf for plates. Her hotel earned a reputation as the best stop between Sacramento and Benicia.

Living amidst Spanish cowboys, Luzena thought nothing of traveling 12 miles on horseback to visit her nearest English-speaking female neighbor. The Wilsons also attended dances and feasts with their Spanish neighbors. The brilliant colors worn by the Spanish ladies amazed Luzena, who delighted in savory stews, piles of tortillas, hot chilies, and "tolerable whisky."

As fall approached, just as the family began building a house, rains and swollen rivers destroyed the hay crop they'd planned to use as partial payment for their land. The only answer was harder work at the hotel and attempts at farming for the next year. Then another blow fell, when a meeting of land commissioners in San Francisco declared that, "among the disputed boundary lines were those of the grant upon which we had bought," Luzena reported. Suddenly, surveyors and squatters staked out pieces of the Wilsons' land, even throwing up a crude cabin to mark their claims. Mason chased the squatters off with a rifle while Luzena waited, terrified he'd be killed by the squatters. It took years before the title of land was established in their favor; meanwhile, the Wilsons fought a continual battle with squatters.

As the years passed, Luzena gave birth to a daughter and helped establish a school for area children. With no local doctor, she also served as both physician and apothecary for neighbors, using a medicine chest left her by a physician who'd passed

through. She dosed patients with calomel and quinine, felt pulses, and checked tongues. "I grew so familiar with the business that I almost fancied myself a genuine doctor," she noted, adding, "I don't think I ever killed anybody, and I am quite sure I cured a good many of my patients."

Like other Western women, Luzena Wilson, forty-niner, worked incredibly hard and persevered to keep her family financially secure, starting over with nothing more at hand than her own hard work and gumption. She rose from flood and fire to begin again, her story yet another tale of the fortunes won and lost in the early gold rush days of California.

## Clara Brown *African American Pioneer*

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In early Colorado, pioneer Clara Brown's hard work, patience, and generosity turned the former slave into a beloved figure.

Clara, born around 1800 in Virginia, was taken by her master, Ambrose Smith, into Kentucky, at that time part of America's frontier. On Smith's farm, teenage Clara "married" a fellow slave named Richard and over the next few years gave birth to four children. One daughter drowned, and tragedy marked the family again when Smith died in 1835. In a cruel blow that shattered so many enslaved families, Clara's entire family was sold at auction to settle Smith's estate. On one horrendous day, she lost her husband; her son, Richard; and her daughters, Margaret and Eliza Jane. Clara herself was purchased by George Brown.

For the next 20 years, Clara served the Brown family, all the time seeking information about what had happened to her