

Early Days in County Told by One-Time Resident  
by Jessica Bird

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Among the patient at the Riverside County Hospital is a keen-eyed intent little woman, Mrs. Alice L. Crain, who tells a story of real pioneer experiences.

Forty-five years ago, when Riverside was a village with the proverbial mudholes for streets, this courageous woman came here to take up a homestead of 640 acres in the Menifee Valley, near Winchester.

She was then Mrs. Alice Graham, formerly a resident of Alton, Ill., who heeded the "westward ho" and came first to New Mexico and then to Los Angeles, still a small town, on January 27, 1884.

She arrived a short time later in Riverside, during one of the worst rainstorms in the history of this vicinity.

The late Ed Miller, brother of Frank A. Miller, was driver of the six-horse stagecoach which brought her with other passengers to Riverside from Colton. The Santa Ana was swollen with flood waters from the mountains, and as the coach entered the current the lead team was caught in an eddy.

Amidst wild excitement, men waded into the raging water and cut the traces of the pair, which was swept away by the water. Miller, a splendid horseman, then brought the coach across in safety with the remaining horses.

In April the lone woman took up residence on the homestead lands. A crude cabin, with a good well in its enclosed porch, was her home. Her nearest neighbor, a Frenchman, lived a quarter of a mile away.

"I was never but once threatened or molested while I lived there alone," recalls Mrs. Crain; "perhaps because I was equipped with a shotgun and a revolver and knew how to use them both. Two Los Angeles school ma'ams who had taken up land in the valley were terrified by a group of rowdies and left their homestead.

"One day I saw a man riding toward my shack across the valley - you could see for miles about and there were no roads anywhere in those days. As he came near I thought: 'Well, that's a bad one,' so I just slipped my revolver into a bag hanging near the door and stood by it as he rode up. He got very noisy and threatened me, telling me I was living on the land without any legal right. I knew I had complied with all the laws and I told him so, quietly. He said he couldn't bluff me, so he started to dismount and said: "I want a drink of water."

"With that I whipped my revolver out and pointed it at him. I said: "Get on that horse and get off these premises, or you'll want something more than a drink of water," Mrs. Crain said, with a recalling gleam in her eye.

She laughed, reminiscently. "He got back on his horse, big sombrero, big cartridge belt, gun and all," she said, "and rode away like the wind."

Once the shotgun came in handy for use other than killing rabbits and coyotes, when a huge California lynx got into Mrs. Crain's chicken house.

"I was afraid to open the door and let it out, for fear it would attack me," she explained, "so I cut a hole in the door, stuck my gun in and fired. The lynx was shot through one ear, and died instantly, but it was so large I couldn't lift it or drag it out. Nearly all my chickens and ducks were dead, and I was standing there wondering what to do, when a stranger drove up in his buggy.

"Talk about good fortune, he was hunting for pelts and furs, or animals to mount, and he not only helped me get the dead lynx outside, he unexpectedly paid me \$10 for it. I was mighty proud of that money."

As one of the most enterprising residents of the district, the woman homesteader took an active part in the affairs of the sparsely settled community. After she married Louis W. Crain, a cattle rancher in the San Jacinto mountains, they lived in the hills for some time. Following his death, Mrs. Crain was in the mountains at what is now Keen Camp, with the late Mrs. Keen, well known as the first hotel keeper in the Strawberry Valley district.

Returning to the Winchester vicinity, Mrs. Crain became one of the trustees of Paloma school district. Her amusing account of the attempts