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Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

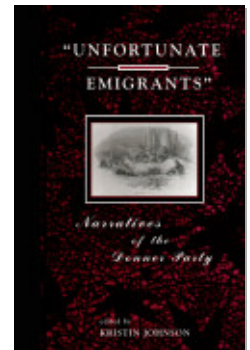
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MARY ANN GRAVES (1826–1891)

Mary Ann Graves was born November 1, 1826, in Putnam County, Illinois, the second surviving child of Franklin Ward and Elizabeth Cooper Graves. The family moved to Marshall County about 1830, where they lived across the Illinois River from the town of Lacon.

Nineteen years old when her family left for California, Mary Graves has been depicted as the belle of the wagon train. According to one story, a smitten Indian attempted to purchase her, and she has been linked romantically with both John Snyder and Charles T. Stanton. Mary figures prominently in accounts of Forlorn Hope.

On May 16, 1847, only a few months after her escape from the mountains, she married Edward Gantt Pyle, Jr., who had been a member of one of the parties guided by Lansford W. Hastings across the cutoff ahead of the Donner party. He had also participated in the Donner relief efforts, transporting provisions to the relief parties.¹ The couple settled in Santa Clara County but their marriage was short lived, for in May 1848, Pyle disappeared. Foul play was suspected and his anxious wife walked along New Almaden Creek looking for a trace of his body, but it was not found until almost a year later. One Antonio Valencia had dragged Pyle to death behind a horse and hidden the corpse. Valencia was hanged on May 10, 1849; Mary Pyle is said to have cooked his food for him while he was awaiting execution, to ensure that he would not cheat the hangman.² This

1 While escorting the refugees with the First Relief to safety, “a young man” proposed to half-starved, thirteen-year-old Virginia Reed. She was still amused by the incident when she wrote of it to C. F. McGlashan more than thirty years later, on May 14, 1879. In a following letter she stated that her suitor was Mary Graves’s first husband, but Stewart apparently missed the reference and incorrectly identified him as Perry McCoon. This confusion is understandable, since both McCoon and Pyle married Donner party survivors and were dragged to death by horses.

2 Nugget Editions Club, C. K. McClatchy Senior High School, *Early Day Romances: Sutter’s Fort 1847–1848* (Sacramento: Nugget Press, 1943), 23; Karl Kortum, personal communication.

murder created a stir in the small Anglo community which was long remembered. The story passed into local folklore and several variants appear in later histories of San Jose and of Santa Clara County.³

Mary Pyle taught school in San Jose for a time. In 1853 she married James Thomas Clarke; they moved to Tulare County about the same time. Despite the distance, Mrs. Clarke sometimes visited her sisters in northern California. Their children remembered her as a woman of decided opinions; they recalled that she was good-looking, had corkscrew curls, and smoked a pipe.⁴ According to her grandchildren, she was a very serious person. She once said, "I wish I could cry but I cannot. If I could forget the tragedy, perhaps I would know how to cry again."⁵

The Clarks had seven children, only two of whom survived their mother. Mary nursed her son Alexander through his last illness. He died on March 5, 1891; she died at the age of sixty-four only four days later.

The Text

Mary Graves's contributions to the literature of the Donner party are varied. She was one of the informants for the account published by Eliza Farnham in 1856 and in 1879 began a correspondence with C. F. McGlashan, who was gathering materials for his history. By that time she was having trouble with her eyes ("She don't even write to me," her brother William warned the historian) and some of her letters had to be written on her behalf by family members.

The following letter is the first of Mary's contributions. Shortly after she married Edward Pyle, Mary wrote a letter to Levi Fosdick, father-in-law of her widowed sister Sarah. The letter was printed at Lacon, the Graves family's home town, in the *Illinois Gazette* on September 9, 1847. It deals mostly with events in the Sierra and leaves out many details; nevertheless, it contains several points of interest. Although an early first-person account, the letter is little known and has been reprinted only once, as "Stay at Home," in *Crossroads* 5 (Summer 1994). This transcription is made from a photocopy provided by the Illinois State Historical Library.

3 The San Francisco *Alta California* of May 10, 1849, provided the dates given here.

4 Karl Kortum, comp., *The McDonnell Ranch*; unpublished family history.

5 Doris Foley, "Mary Graves, A Heroine of the Donner Party," *Nevada County Historical Society* 8 (July 1954).



Mary Ann Graves (1826–1891); date of photo, 1879. California Department of Parks & Recreation, Sutter's Fort State Historic Park