

This story entails the adventures, wanderings and hardships, that expands, embedding in a wealth of history that is reflected in early California history by two unsuspecting individuals, Ben Kelsey and his legendary wife Nancey who was the "first woman to cross the Sierras.

Nancey walked for two days across the salt lake dessert, with out food, water and barefoot she wore out her shoes. She carried baby Martha in her arms while also leading her horse and soothing Ben who was ill with cramps. Not once did this Woman ever complain.

She was inspirational to the Bartleson-Bidwell party. Bidwell and the famous trapper "Bear Dawson drew strength from her, both commenting in their memoirs that they would never forget her courage. The Kelsey family participated in the Bear Flag party working with Kit Carson and then Colonel Fremont. Nancey furnished the material and made the first flag to wave over Sonoma in lieu of the Mexican flag.

She was known as the "Betsy Ross" of California. Nancey constantly fought Indians and hunted along the side of Ben and in the process had ten children. They traveled the length and width of California in their covered wagon like one travels by bus. They did stop in San Jose and liked it but Ben had to see the Sunrise and Sunsets beyond every mountain.

CONTENTS

- 1.....TREK ACROSS THE SALT LAKE DESSERT
- 2.....THEIR CONSTANT TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES
- 3.....BEAR FLAG PARTY
- 4.....BEN WORKING FOR FREMONT
- 5.....PARTNERSHIP WITH GENERAL VALLEJO
- 6.....HER DEATH IN CUYUMA

SOURCE OF INFORMATION

- 1.....LAKE COUNTY MUSEUM (LAKEPORT)
- 2.....THE BOOK ON THE KELSEY FAMILY
- 3.....NANCEY KELSEY'S MEMOIRS ,

NANCEY KELSEY
PIONEER LEGEND-DEVOTED WIFE

Joe Pommier
1651 Todd Rd.Ex.
Lakeport, Calif.
954 53
707-263 3936

There exists a multitude of true adventures and sagas that Nancy and Ben Kelsey experienced in their quest for the dream that always seemed to elude them, this story represents a segment of their most interesting life that did in fact contribute to the chronicles depicting early American History of California. If I sound like I respect and admire this exciting fascinating woman, I am guilty.

The "Manifest Destiny", Presidents Polk's political dream of expansion, subjugating an alignment of the Atlantic Coast with the Pacific Coastal Region , nothing but nothing would interfere or stand in the way as a barrier; he was obsessed with this and applied his energy and the resources of the United States in order to obtain a vast area of land that encompassed five states .We declared War on Mexico in 1846 and it ended viciously with the defeat of Mexico in 1848. We had achieved our goal. Prior to the War, thousands of American Settlers were penetrating the South and Northern California regions without proper arrangement with the Mexican Government ,in short we, in essence were "not welcomed". Thus the word "Greaser" was introduced depicting our feelings towards the Mexicans expressing the emotions embroiled insensetively with hostility,

mistrust and terror reigned supreme and caught up in this political upheaval were two unsuspecting individuals, Ben and Nancy Kelsey.

Now you ask, why a story on Nancy? true she was not as colorful as Kit Carson who was tabbed "The Monarch Of The Plains" or the righteous Colonel Fremont so named the "Pathfinder"! Yet this magnificent ,humble uneducated woman with undaunted courage integrated with a no-nonsense attitude involved with her husband Ben , brothers Samuel and Andrew in the "Bear Flag Party" which was an all male organization. Nancy was instrumental in the donation of the cloth and sewing of the flag, yet writers of history in that era failed to admit and credit her for this, because they were short sighted and did not understand her personality. Kit Carson organized and rallied 90 mounted riders proclaiming emphatically that " they would give their lives for the glorious cause" in the overthrow of the Mexican Government. If Nancy could have participated in the action I'm certain she would have been proclaimed "President Of California" which was feasible if only for a few days.

Nancy was born in Barren County ,Kentucky on August 1 1823 and eventually the family moved to Jackson County, Missouri. Where at the age of fifteen ,she met and married Ben Kelsy who was 10 years her senior . Ben was a tough,robust outdoorsman who was also a gunsmith and this knowledge would benifit him in the future. Nancy although young was in many ways a wise woman beyond her tender age and even then Ben could do no wrong.

He was an adventurer, forever chasing his dreams in the conquest of big money and all through their long married life ,they traveled California extensively as pioneers never settling down and not once did Nancy ever complain. She simply stated" where my husband goes,I go" and this was a matter of fact, and in her travels she had a total of 10 children, plus Ben required her personal care because he was always ill or in dire pain.

Her first born was Martha Ann 1839,next was Sameul in 1841, who died on the 8th day of birth, next was Sarah Jane,born in Jan. 1842, Margaret in 1843, Andrew in 1846, Mary Ellen, 1848 Nancy Rose 1852, Georgia 1859, William 1859, the last was Samuel the II . (no date) Can you imagine 10 kids to look after, then in the process participate in Ben's Gypsy way of life?,this my friends requires understanding beyond comprehension ,certainly fortitude.

Dr. John March from Jackson County,set his goal for California prior to the Kelsey's and was instrumental in influencing them by a letter describing the beauty that was California ,in retrospect this appealed to Ben's wistful meandering Soul, the name"California" enticed him and had a magical ring to it. On May 19, 1841 there was anticipation and excitement ,the adventurous party was on its way. Actually there existed two parties which entailed 65 people that would separate at Soda Springs. One heading for Oregon, led by Father Pierre Jean de Smet and the larger party breaking for California was the ill planned Bartleson-Bidwell group. They utilized the Trappers trail in

the direction of North Fork at the Platte River, then changed direction towards the Southern pass. Next was Bear Valley near the great Salt Lake. Trace their journey on the map and visualize the vast expanse of this hostile environment that layed in ambush for these unsuspecting hearty Souls.

On August 11, the two parties split up, each one heading in their own particular direction, one heading North to Oregon, the other in a South-western angle towards California with Nancy the only Woman in the party. The die was cast, what began as an innocent adventure would soon become a "living hell". The Bartelson-Bidwell party was traveling without knowledge of the terrain or of the miles that awaited them. Why this occurred and why without proper planning, I don't know, the realization of this should have been from the on-set. nothing but heresay directions would be their guide in the quest of the Mary River and caught up in this revelation was Nancy and baby Martha. Samuel Kelsey (Ben's brother) and his family decided to head to Oregon with the other party and also the newly wedded Isaiah Kelsey. I'm certain from this parting there was a tinge of sorrow and sadness for Nancy, the Kelsey family was divided in half. The endless miles of sagebrush slowed their wagons, affecting their progress to the minimum effort. The passengers and the animals were feeling the harshness of the rugged country and the constant strain was now begining to take its toll dramatically. Water and supplies began to dwindle dangerously at an alarming rate. The continous search for water was frustrating, it was non-existent.

Next you will read an excerpt from the diary by John Bidwell, which I believe illustrates their ordeal.

"Starting out early hoping to find water where we could refresh ourselves and the animals, but atlas! the Sun beamed heavily on our heads as the day advanced and we could see nothing before us but extensive arid plants glimmering with heat and salt. At length the plains became so impregnated with salt that vegetation entirely ceased. The ground was many places white as snow with salt and perfectly smooth. The midday Sun made us fancy we could see timber upon the plains. We marched forward with remitted pace till we discovered it was an illusion."

This was a classic case of disillusionment and duress by these settlers and amply described by Mr. Bidwell. I get the feeling from his dailey journal that he felt the outlook was hopeless, bleak and steadily deteriorating, yet determination was also present in his words. 30 days had passed since their embarkation from Soda springs and travel conditions worstened. An emergency meeting was held and it was decided to abandon the wagons because they gradually became a hindrance and an impractical possibility for travel on the "God for saken trail" This had to be a momentous decision by these people. They packed the supplies on the animals and carried small items on their person, The wagons were then abandoned to become wooden skeletons, bleached out by the cruel Sun.

The weak rode horses and the strong walked diligently

with wooden steps. Nancy rode but walked more carrying the infant Martha and as each day progressed their hopes dwindled and fear begat fear. Thus they began killing the oxen for food and even then , it was still a losing battle to trek the Western Nevada Humboldt sink. Finally it happened, the last of the oxen was slain and consumed .The animals left were the spent horses and mules, I'm certain at this point these courageous people felt the futility of it all. Also from this exodus materialized an inner strength of "spirit" which perhaps ignited the men ,because Nancy's steadfast cool character and again I say her "courage" guided them. For two days she walked on the white salt desert, shoeless" they were completely worn out and she carried her baby and did not take a drop of water. She smiled and walked slowly but steadily, never once complaining. This unique individual had to be inspirational because the men were astonished and a warmth of admiration blended with respect followed her painful footsteps.

Nickales "Bear" Dawson, a rugged mountain man and trapper in his memoirs flatly stated, "I looked back and saw Mrs. Kelsey, behind me with her child in her arms, barefoot and leading her horse ...a sight I shall never forget". Nancy for two days ate nothing but acorns and Ben almost died from constant cramps so Nancy had to deal with his problem. Horses were killed for food and from this last resort for survival, it did manage to sustain their needs. Bidwell also wrote in his memoirs, " that he would never forget the courage of Nancy, walking barefoot

/

with baby Martha", a resolute determined woman , that burned an impression forever in his memory. In later years this man became rich, famous and well known in the Chico area, also he ran for the presidency Of The United States on the Independent party.

Finally after experiencing freezing conditions with near starvation they looked down into the valley of Sonora . Can you imagine the elation and emotion that must have been felt by these settlers? It must have been a revelation with a deep sense of pride! At this point I would like to interject, that Mexico was dead set against American pioneers moving and settling in California. This was flatly presented in an official document to our Government in Washington D.C. However it was totally ignored by the settlers, it was "California or bust!" and of course problems began to arise from this fact. This was decreed by Mexico since 1830, "that Americans were not to be trusted" and is a matter of record. The Mexicans preferred the French and the Russians.

The Kelsey's were caught up in the problems of that era and after leaving Sutters Fort, Ben and Andrew became involved with then Colonel Fremont and befriended General Vallejo. Nancy cooked meals for Colonel Fremont many times and became associated with Kit Carson, commenting " he was a strange one" Colonel Fremont had been riding patrol with a company of Calvary heading in a Southern direction, a problem arose and Ben Kelsey rode after them to inform Fermont of the situation so they returned and it was a two day ride. The men had also been

in the field for a period of 30 days and wore the same clothing, now you must admit they smelled like horses and were caked with sweat. Nancy and a hired woman immediately began to wash the clothes and repair the countless rips and tears . This tireless energetic woman worked diligently, again not once complaining and did not rest untill the clothes were washed and presentable.

Ben while in Napa served with Fremont for a short period, because Fremont ordered him to shoot 3 men crossing the river whom Fremont considered dangerous , the men consisted of old Don Berryessa and his two nephews, all three were unarmed. Ben being part mule refused to carry out the order, Berryessa was a friend of his. Fremont who was accustomed to having his orders carried out without hesitaion was "offended" and this incident was never forgotten by him. It was deemed, insubordination and no one had ever dared to refuse him. Kit Carson responded to the order and as always, carried it out to the extreme. Kit Carson for your information was 5'3", stoop shouldered and cut a dashing figure with his red hair. He was prominent in California history and popularized nationally by Fremont and his wife Jessie, their influence was impeccable. Ben Kelsey was a nomad who could hear the call of the wild, he also had visions of being a wheeler dealer, with the never-ending quick "get rich" schemes and possessed the insatiable desire for "travel". Settling down? "never". In some instances he made good money only to lose it on other foolhardy ventures. To me he was the American "Don Quixote" the "Man from La Mancha" with the heart of the great Spanish explorer,

"Pizzaro" and Nancy as always was tacient, reserved and never complained, she believed in "her man". In the Month of April they headed in the direction of Cache Creek and they both enjoyed the freedom of camping out, Nancy was happy. They hunted and killed the plentiful deer and from the skins she handcrafted beautiful Spanish boots ,ah but then Ben began, to get fidgety. Nancy with her infinite wisdom realized what this meant, and accepting the realization, it was traveling time again. They settled in Napa Valley, one mile South of Calistoga, thus once again the Kelsey's settled and constructed the first white settlers cabin in that particular vicinity and Ben utilizing his hunting skills with Nancy's supervision, together they managed to purchase 100 head of cattle. From this in 1843 along with other cattle- men, they organized a drive North to Oregon where prices were higher for cattle.

When they approached the Sacramento River, Nancy and Ann waited on the bank while the herd was crossing . Nude Indians began to descend on them and Nancy reacted by instinctively reaching for her rifle and then gave them fair warning. Ben who was watching ordered "Bear Dawson" to take care of the situation, so "Bear" shot one Indian and the rest scattered, however he captured one and with a gun pointed to the Indians head, he forced him to swim across the river towing Nancy and Ann safely across. They experienced a hazardous but exciting journey, such as constant Indian attacks, perilous trails and the loss of cattle but the drive finally ended when they

arrived in Fort Vancouver on the North bank of the Columbia River. The long ordeal was over and from the money he obtained from the sale ,Ben purchased supplies and dry goods to bring back and sell at a big profit. Nancy as usual did not doubt his judgment, this was her man and he could do no wrong.

In 1844 once again it was back to California and while in the Shasta area , Nancy, her two daughters ,Ben and four returning men were attacked again by Indians. Nancy said"arrows were flying into the camp and I hid the children in the bushes, I wondered if I would ever see daylight again". This attack must have been vicious and the Indians numerous because I have never read where Nancy had ever thought of death, but in the final struggle many Indians were killed without a loss to the Kelsey party. Once again there destination was on a Southern course.

The Bear Flag Party was in existence and found themselves in a turbulence,accompanied by onfusing times with dramatic, chaotic events unfolding.. The word"Greaser" was expressed and voiced by the men in the Bear Flag party which applied to any or all Mexicans. They resented the Mexican flag and its colors which flew in Sonoma and slowly this momentum began to increase and expand, the cry was to"replace"the Mexican flag with the crude California Bear Flag" This was accomplished by the brash Americans amidst cheers and tears with minimum or no resistance from the Mexicans. Please remember that Nancy did make the Flag, she was even given the title "The Betsy Ross of California"and

in her memoirs she stated the fact that she was instrumental in this and I really don't question that, however according to other Historians, two saddle makers, a Mr. Ben Dewell and a Thomas Collie were the individuals responsible for the making of the flag and this statement is a matter of record, I thought that you the reader should be informed because this is an interesting point of view, of course I believe that a historical investigation should be made and that proper credit be applied. I do believe Nancy, she was her own person and did not personify the typical settlers house wife, she in many instances fought along the side of Ben and exemplified character. that is most unique. I also believe writers of that time did not give her credibility, because they did not understand this special woman, nor did they want to.

General Vallejo was a man who believed in treating his own people and Americans fairly, he enjoyed dealing with the Americanos, a few married into his family, also the fact is the beautiful Mexican females preferred the American male and of course this was resented by the Mexican males. He also enjoyed Ben and Nancy, what he had in common with them I don't know but he respected them. During the Mexican - American War he was imprisoned (1846 - 1848) and after the war, Ben and General Vallejo joined together in one of his enterprising sure fire business schemes, of course with the blessing from Nancy. The saw mill was located on the Sonoma creek where it mushroomed into a profitable business. They employed about 30 men and of

course Nancy cooked for all of them. Things were looking up for the Kelsy's and then it happened, Ben began to gaze and became shiftless, this operation was tying him down and hampering his style, with a feeling of being "cooped up," Nancy must have noticed the signs and Ben, well sir he sold his half of the business to General Velljo.

With the money acquired, he purchased supplies and followed the Gold strike! and sold them to the miners for a high margin of profit and from the earnings he purchased sheep at a dollar a head then resold them to the miners for \$16.00 a head with no qualms. He made big money in the transactions. At this point there seems to be a hesitation from some historians about the mining era, Ben and Andrew did gather up the Pomo Indians, especially the young and began to mine for gold. Some historians claim that the Indians were paid well, the Indians claimed otherwise and from this, mistrust by the Indians was most profound. Abuse by the Kelsey's was horrendous and this was to follow them and change a segment of California History.

Ben and Andrew purchased cattle and horses from Salvador Vallejo who was the General's brother and from this they realized a lease for thousands of Acres in the Clear Lake Region, and it would expire only upon their demise. This was an ironic clause assumption. Andrew Kelsey and Charley Stone managed the ranch with the procured help of the local Pomo Indians. I believe that the abuse manifested by Andrew Kelsey and partner

Charley Stone towards the Indians, was the simple fact that they were raised in a Southern State that dealt in slavery. If man power is cheap why not utilize it and replace them quickly with another, productive labor therefore is but a fraction. The word "murder" was used by the Military, and the early settlers plus the relatives of the deceased along with their friends. The Pomo Indians and I agree with them, were justifiable in the act. Indians were "murdered" from Calistoga to the Russian River and the final blow was in Scotts Valley and in the Bloody Island Massacre, this was hatred, this was total greed and.... all for the want of revenge. Nancy in her memoirs did not comment on this aspect nor denied it. Ben and Nancy did not participate in this action, mainly because once again Ben had the wandering fever, it was traveling time and this lasted for a period of 10 years. They lived off the land from hunting, fishing and as always, fighting off renegade Indians. Nancy never once complained she was always there for Ben at his side, right or wrong. On one of their trips to Sacramento, Ben again opened up a trading post located in the upper vicinity and as luck would have it, Ben became ill and Nancy packed him up and went in search of a doctor. When they returned to the post, everything was stolen by the Indians, all was lost. Once again misfortune befriended them all was lost, everything that was not nailed down, vanished, Nancy never wavered, instead they pointed their wagon in the direction of Humboldt County, fortune it seems finally smiled upon them. A sum of \$13,000

was sent to them for the cattle and horses sold in Clear Lake from the men who purchased them. Ben and Nancy founded the Cities of Arcata and Eureka, remaining there for awhile. Samuel Kelsey and his family settled the same region, once again the Kelsy's were united creating peace and contentment. Ben in his fool hardy plans lost a great deal of money and once again financial problems haunted them. Ben's way of solving the problem was simple.... move ! pack up and leave, Nancy and the kids headed for Sonoma by ship and Ben signed on as a scout, meeting her in Sonoma. The Kelsey family was getting larger and I'm sure Nancy began to talk Ben into settling down because thats what he did, but, the inevitable but, Ben opened up a toll gate bridge thats right! He did it again.. It spanned the Kern River and lady luck was smiling at him...Ben decided to sell it, he could not plant his two feet down and become stable. This time Nancy did complain but not about Ben, she was upset that the balance of the money owed from the Lake County sale was not collectible. My feeling of this was, in moving around contact was lost, the laws were weak and the buyers didn't want to pay off. One of them was a Carson.

Ben and Nancy's next destination was Mexico, this trip lasted for a period of 3 years and adventure followed them in their travels, in one instance in Texas the men were out hunting and their party was attacked by Indians, the women hid the children then themselves in the bush but Mary Ellen was found and battered, then scalped. Her cries and screams penetrated

the area, nothing could be done she was 13. Also all the money from their savings was stolen, Nancy must have been crushed and frustrated. When the men returned there was anger in their hearts, they rode after the Indians in pursuit for 75 miles and not once did they make contact. They headed for Stockton, California where Mary Ellen died from complications 2 years later after receiving continuous medical treatment.

In 1880 Ben and Nancy settled down in Central Los Angeles which by then boasted a population of a whopping 50,000 still Ben and Nancy managed to move two more times but in the same vicinity. In 1888 Ben passed away, and was buried in the Rosedale Cemetery, making this his last move. Ben's latter years were filled with conjecture, some say he saw "The Light" and became a traveling Minister. I doubt this very much because Ben was his own man, he followed the Sunrises and the Sunsets at the drop of a hat, yet in the process he always remained a dutiful father to his family and regardless of his escapades he loved Nancy. When Ben passed away, there wasn't much left for Nancy, she missed the wilderness and the big blue sky, so she moved North to the sparsely populated area of Cuyama, which is 60 miles East of Santa Maria. She lived in a small simple cabin and raised chickens to sustain her simple uncomplicated needs, she was comfortable and content. In this small poor community, Nancy made many friends, especially in Santa Maria. People looked at her with awe and respect, after all Nancy was a legend.

She was a sturdy Pioneer, made if you forgive me out of

"the"right Stuff" few could match her life and vast experience. What one dosen't hear much about is her children, I presume that after maturity they left home to follow their own dreams after all wasn't that the way they were raised? Nancy was an independent soul who would have refused their help. In her waning years she would mount her horse and perform what ever medical house calls that were needed . Nancy was experienced prolificaly in the knowledge of herbs and teas that nature provided in abundance from the wilderness. Nancy passed away on August 10, 1896...

Looking at the pictures you can see the likeness of Fort Sutter a haven to all the settlers and where Ben and Nancy spent sometime in their wanderings. An interesting note here , Mexico in the pre-war years tried to errdicate this fort by offering to purchase it. Of course Sutter being an astute business man said"yes"and asked for \$10,000. Well the Mexican government pondered the amount and said"muncho gracias ,pero no!" They should have bought it because for countless of American settlers this was a gathering place. Also shown is,the cabin where Nancy spent her last years in residence, you can see her wants were simple and insignificant. This served her purpose, there was a roof over her head . Indeed she was the product of the Earth that she loved so much.

Ben Kelsey's picture depics an individual precisely as he looks. A Nomad that was never content and who lived for adventure and challenged it time after time,always wistful

with no roots but did have an eye for the lust of living and a dream that he never got around to or could not find.

Then there is the graceful picture of Nancy, please look at it. What you see is a strong determined face, it radiates a special strength that displays courage, her eyes exemplifies pride and understanding, her hands are that of a person who was willing to work, hunt and yet provide a touch of tenderness. She has stated more than once "where my husband goes, I go!". I would not describe her as being glamorous, I believe the word would be "handsome" she was exactly that. I believe that James Clayborn , the famous "Mountain Man" said it best, " she was a fine looking woman"..... I would like to add a footnote, she was a Pioneer Legend and a Devoted Wife..a woman such as this, will not pass this way again for a long time....Imbedded in her tombstone by her friends is this message " Nancy Kelsey, the first woman to cross the Sierra."



Ben Kelsey



The little cabin 60 miles east of Santa Maria where Nancy Kelsey spent the last nine years of her life, raising and selling chickens and treating sick neighbors with herbal medicines. Her neighbors scraped together enough money to buy her a "real coffin," but the cash-poor mountain folk couldn't afford to bury her near her husband Ben in Los Angeles.

*Mr. Ben Kelsey, the first
white woman that crossed
Sierra Nevada mountains*

