

**MRS. MYLES POORE O'CONNOR:
A PORTRAIT IN SANTA CLARA VALLEY**

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The following account is an imaginary journal written by a young settler arriving in the Santa Clara Valley in the year 1830. In it she recounts some of the life she experiences and the challenges she faces. Written through her perspective as a child growing into a young adult, she corresponds with her family members who remained in New England. The woman is the eventual bride of the famous Santa Clara judge and renowned philanthropist, Mr. Myles Poore O'Connor.

MRS. MYLES POORE O'CONNOR
A PORTRAIT IN SANTA CLARA VALLEY

February 16, 1830

My dear grandmother,

After an unbelievable 5 months we have finally arrived in the Santa Clara Valley. Although our family and other members of the wagon train are weary it was with great joy and celebration that we first spotted the Guadalupe River. It promises to be a place of abundance and good fortune and as we rested for the night by the river it was with calm hearts and hopeful prayers. The flowing river seemed to soothe us all as we washed clothes, bathed luxuriously, and watered the animals to their heart's content. How easily the spirit is lifted in the light of God's wonderful creations. There is discussion amongst the leaders that tomorrow we will continue north in search of the Santa Clara Mission, dedicated by Father Junipero Serra on May 15, 1784. If we find it then I believe we will have reached our destination, ready to start anew. Father has described the beautiful wooden cross which has survived three moves, as has the mission itself. Apparently the original church and monastery were destroyed by the flooding of this very same river that tonight brings us such peace and contentedness. After the Franciscan monks found a temporary site they began building the third mission, but it was damaged twice by terrible earthquakes. To think so much perseverance is needed to secure a house for God's people is quite incredible. As we travel tomorrow I will be driving the wagon, a task I have grown comfortable with during the long journey and which I rather enjoy as my thinking time. John Trask has served us well as our guide and requested that I keep watch for a welcoming stand of tall trees planted by Father Catala at the entrance to the mission. Excitement is wild amongst us as we sing and dance under the stars.

Good night my dear grandma. We miss you and hope life is good for you and papa. I promise to write when next we are settled.

Love,

Abigail

April 19, 1830

Dearest Grandmother,

We are overjoyed with our good fortune. Since last I wrote, we arrived tattered and travel-weary at the Santa Clara Mission, to be greeted warmly and with open arms by

the Franciscan monks. The wooden cross left us quiet and grateful for the good fortune of feeling like, at long last, we were truly "home". Even the men, hearty and determined in their strength, were quiet and stood with their heads bowed in silence as the mission bells sounded their jubilant welcome. As I looked up at the cross to thank God for his guidance and protection, the inscription brought a lump of emotion to my parched throat. Grandmother, how perfect that the inscription read: "He that shall persevere to the end, he shall be saved." (Matthew 24: 13) As I was helped from my wagon I paused in grateful reflection for the opportunity to continue to serve in such a promised land. After a lunch of tortillas, beans and roast chicken we all proceeded through the beautiful entryway where we assembled for mass. I felt so peaceful as I passed under the pale yellow banksia rose intertwined with purple wisteria above the arbor. The flowers were in full bloom as if in welcome, an event that apparently only happens in April when they bloom together.

June 24, 1830

Dear Grandmother,

Although we have begun to feel a new rhythm of life here there is still much to be done before we truly can call it home. The men work seven days a week, with the help of the Franciscans and the many Indians who live in the area. In exchange for their labor, the women will often assist the Franciscans with their efforts to teach the rudiments of Christianity. We are also all learning Spanish and spend the day cooking, weaving, making clothes, and tending the garden. Slowly the adobe houses are growing in number and papa says that within a few weeks we will leave our wagon home and move into our new "mansion". To have a sleeping room, a kitchen, and a hearth for our family of six seems like a luxury we can ill take for granted. As the excitement of the mission community grows, so do the wonderful possibilities for life in the beautiful valley. The men have, in addition to building, planted acres in wheat, corn, and beans. The abundance is overwhelming after having made due with so very little the past few months. Cattle and sheep also graze happily in the fields and, in addition to providing us with their leather and wool, we are always aware of how they provide for our increasingly abundant food supply here. Yes, grandmother, it is with grateful hearts that we attend our daily mass.

I do so enjoy your letters and hope you will continue to write. Life in New England seems to suit you and grandfather nicely and I am so glad to hear that his printing business is prospering. Perhaps someday we will be privileged to receive written news from you in the form of newspapers to catch up on all that is happening there!

Love to you,

Abigail

July 4, 1837

Dearest Grandmother,

As we gather together to celebrate the Fourth of July with feasting and merriment it is somewhat bittersweet here in the valley. Although our lives have been most prosperous we are continually aware of the loss of so many Indians who have no resistance to diseases such as measles and smallpox. Our sadness is multiplied as we realize we brought these diseases over the miles with us and now our friends, who have toiled and shared their lives side by side with us to make our rancho so comfortable, are dying in numbers too pitiful to relay in this letter. The Santa Clara Mission, we have heard from travelers, had become so well known for the numerous baptisms performed here. Now, we are also in line for the horrible recognition of becoming the mission who leads all others in burials. It is truly sad and a part of me wonders if it is right to be celebrating the hard-won independence we gained from our mother country, England, seeing all the suffering it has brought to the Indians in our midst.

Mother and Father are fine and continue to work hard. Ranching seems to suit Father so very well and he has been successful in securing the purchase of additional land to add to the healthy heads of cattle that roam so contentedly in our fields. Jed has been attending school at the Mission, as has Annie, and they take great pride in their reading. It is wonderful in the quiet of the evening to gather together and have them share bible stories by the fire while mother and I spin. Little Timothy is also getting along well but seems to be too restless at the age of seven to dwell for any length of time on anything of importance. Mother insists he will begin school with the others in September, much to his protests.

December 23, 1842

Grandmother,

What joy fills my heart in this writing. Not only celebrating Christmas and the blessed birth of the Christ child fills our lives with renewed hope and rejoicing but my life is also full planning an exciting future. I have met a most wonderful gentleman by the name of Myles Poore O'Connor, and plans are underway for our engagement to be announced forthcoming. He is a most incredible man, born in Ireland and educated in the United States. As a lawyer he has aspirations to become a Judge, a goal that I am sure he is capable of achieving. A more caring, considerate man I have never encountered. We are planning to be married in April and I pray that the same roses and wisteria blossoms that bloomed upon our arrival here almost 12 years ago will bless our union as we exchange sacred vows at the mission. Mother is insistent that

my wedding gown include laces and fabric from England so you best be prepared for such an extravagant request. Although I want to be a beautiful bride I am so proud to commit my life to Mr. O'Connor that what I wear does not seem of grave importance right now. As the time draws nearer I am certain mother will, again, be proven right and I will be eternally grateful for her loving attention to details. We are looking into the possibility of obtaining a land grant and dear Mr. Campbell, our Methodist minister in the town, is helping to survey the town site. It is a time of infinite possibilities, grandmother, and I am sure you share our family excitement over my impending marriage. Ah, were the miles between us shorter it would be my honor to have you and grandfather sharing in our new life here. For now, I will simply promise to keep writing with utmost detail.

I look forward to your next letter. Until then, please begin to think of me as the soon to be,

Mrs. Myles Poore O'Connor

Much love to you, as always,

Abigail

March 19, 1843

Dearest Grandfather and Grandmother,

What a glorious winter of preparation and anticipation. It is difficult to know where to begin so please be patient with my excitement. The winter was unusually wet and cold for the valley which has turned the springtime into glorious fields of wildflowers. The California poppy is magnificent in its brightness and I have taken to bringing handfuls of them into the house to place about for good cheer. The men are busier than ever in the fields, plowing and making the fields ready for the actual planting in another few weeks. To have the damp earth is a blessing. We managed nicely through the winter months with our storage of potatoes, turnips, onions, parsnips, beets, carrots, and artichokes but the welcome of fresh lettuce, cabbage, radishes, and snow peas from the garden will be a delight. The venison is also plentiful and the cattle and chickens are thriving.

It hardly seems possible that my wedding day is approaching. The women have joined me faithfully in quilting a most pretty wedding band bedspread which was finished last week. At my insistence I asked each of them to embroider their initials in the square they completed, my own personal good luck omen. I will rest peacefully with my new husband under it for many happy years to come, I am certain. As my special day approaches mama seems happier by the minute and I catch her singing cheerfully to herself the song she learned from you as a bride:

“Sundays for weddings,
Mondays for wealth,
Tuesdays for healthy,
Wednesdays best days of all,
Thursdays for losses,
Fridays for crosses,
Saturdays, no luck at all!”

Do you remember the song, grandmother? Preparations for the nuptials seem all completed, right down to the beautiful wedding gown that has been fitted and hung for over a month now in the bedroom. Your lace and linen created a most sentimental beginning for the creation that mama spent so many hours lovingly sewing for me. I will wear a garland of flowers in my hair with a lover's knot tied around my waist. We have dried rosemary and rose petals for the path to the altar and Jane and MaryAnne are planning to make small packets of wheat to be tossed at us as we leave, man and wife. Already I have a very full hope chest with some pieces of pottery, my quilt, a bible from Myles' family, and my collection of colorful ribbons which I started so long ago in New England. Do you remember it, grandmother? It is my treasure chest of dreams and hopes-perhaps some day soon I will be patiently weaving these very same ribbons through my first-born's hair, assuming it be a girl!

I must go and gather the eggs. Outside I can hear the faint croaking of the frogs and so assume we are due for some rain tonight. It will help the crops flourish and so I wish it to be so.

You will be in my prayers as I kneel before the priest on my wedding day. How I wish you could be with us sharing the happiness.

Love,

Abigail

June 24, 1843

Dearest Grandmother and Grandfather,

Everything was perfect on my wedding day. Myles was so handsome and confident and I felt pretty and wonderfully blessed to become the new Mrs. Myles Poore O'Connor. After a night away we returned to our new adobe home and I began the task of setting up housekeeping. My sisters arrived laden with herbs they had dried and they made the kitchen smell so pleasant. They helped me unpack a few of my belongings and arrange some of the furniture that had come from Myles' family home. Mama insisted I take the butter churn and already I have plans to be baking bread in our new hearth tomorrow. The smell of chicken and dumplings will greet Myles upon

his return this afternoon, and I have even set out the prettiest candles we were given for our wedding to dine by this evening. Soon I hope to get Maria from the mission to join me here and teach me some of her specialties-tortillas, corn cakes, and tamales. I feel the excitement of my new life unfolding by the hour.

I hope this finds you both in good health and enjoying the beauty of a New England summer. Please do write to me again, soon!

Love,

your granddaughter,

Mrs. Myles O'Connor

December, 1844

Dearest Grandfather,

It is with a heavy heart that I reply to your last letter, brought to me just today by mama in her grief. The passing of our dearest grandmother, loving mother, and wife to you has left us sad beyond consolation. Even at this writing my eyes are so filled with tears it is difficult to write and I know you are feeling alone and equally at odds. My only peace comes in knowing she is with her maker, watching over our very lives as we mourn the loss of hers. Might I dare to ask if you would be willing to come west, grandfather, to the land of opportunity and rejoin your loving family here? Please consider it as there is so much hope and possibility in our midst, not to say the loving support of us all for you.

We have been hearing rumors about the possibility of war with Mexico sometime in the new year and in preparation for such an event John Fremont arrived in Santa Clara for a town meeting. Settlers are arriving by the wagon load and, although we are welcoming to these weary strangers as we were welcomed so many years ago, it seems they are arriving with a different set of values and expectations. Talk of acquiring land, seeking gold, and having complete control of California by the Americans is everywhere. I must say that my Mexican friends here at the mission are as confused as we are about the bigger intent of this impending war. It will lead to great change, and whatever these battles are going to cost in lives is beyond imagining. Myles has been requested to be present at negotiations with Stephen Kearny and the Mexican authorities. I am frightened for our future and the peacefulness of the valley life seems fragile. This valley seems to be taking on a new life of its own.

Grandfather, were you to consider coming westward I would wish you an arrival during a time to peace, not conflict. We must remain attentive to the news of the day before we make plans to bring you across the plains. Your safety is of utmost importance to

us all.

Please know you are securely in our prayers and that we held a service for grandmother in the mission with many joyful memories shared of her wonderful life. I will faithfully continue to write you, and trust you will find writing to me of comfort, also.

In sadness and love,

Your granddaughter, Abigail

June, 1846

Dear Grandfather,

As anticipated, war between the United States and Mexico is in our midst. Myles tries to calm my heart but, being with child, I seem edgy about almost anything having to do with death rather than life. Mama says it is normal in my condition. John Fremont has sent settlers into the Santa Clara Valley and shortly after, our dear Father Jose Maria del Refugio Suarez del Real was authorized to sell the Mission lands. With the new settlers there is an ever-growing need for both religious and educational institutions here in Santa Clara. We are in the midst of much change and there is talk of turning a part of the Mission into the first college in the State of California. They have talked at length with Myles about his visions for the community and we talk late into the evening arguing about the importance of taking care of the Indians who we found here already living peacefully when we first arrived. The mission buildings are generally in disrepair and it seems like we can barely keep up with the demands of more people from so many different places. Further talk of a gold rush is everywhere. In fact, it is so bad that many call it Gold Rush Fever. Already people want to begin to pack up their wagons and head further north, leaving the Santa Clara Valley for golden fields of dreams. We are not of any intention to join them, feeling our lives are blessed here quite fully.

I am in good health and the imminent birth of the first of the O'Connor clan has us nervous but excited. We are hopeful there will be many good reports of similar occurrences in the coming years.

Until later, please continue to inform us of your plans to move westward, as we have discussed. We will await your arrival with open arms and a hearty stew. Mama says that within three months you should be here. Well, please hurry so you can help us welcome your first great-grandchild to America. What blessed events we await so patiently.

Travel with safety, grandfather, and keep a good spirit as the days will seem long and tedious. We promise the beauty of the valley will make it all worth your long journey.

Until I can deliver them to you myself, I send you hugs and kisses,

Abigail O'Connor

Abigail's journal ends here, awaiting the imminent arrival of her grandfather to the Santa Clara Valley. The ideas presented in the chronicle have been woven from historical accounts that included materials researched from:

- *A profile of MISSION SANTA CLARA DE ASIS, written by Teresa Pugh, Santa Clara University, 1980
- *A profile/brochure from the SANTA CLARA MISSION CEMETERY, prepared by James P. Delgado
- *Readings for life-style background from THE PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN THE BIG HOUSE OF MARKET STREET, a collection of stories bout Captain Christian Lass and his household, edited by Majorie Myers, 1993
- *Readings from the San Jose Mercury News about Santa Clara (On-line sources)
- *Santa Clara City History: A bibliography and time line. Compiled by Mary Hanel, Santa Clara Library Reference Librarian, 1994
- *Personal observation and visitation to the Santa Clara Mission and Cemetery, April, 1996

It is through the eyes of this settler that we become a little more familiar with the challenges facing the Santa Clara Valley settlers and the significant role of the Mission in their lives.

(3,342 words)