

John Smiley and Naomi Toll Smiley

The story of John and Naomi seems rather typical of Gold Rush love stories, the young man leaves home and his sweetheart to join the Gold Rush, several years later his faithful sweetheart follows him to California. But when you look carefully at this particular story, it isn't quite what it seems. Facts and dates, historians love them!

John Smiley was born in Blenheim, Ontario Canada in 1835. He crossed the Plains with a wagon train when he was 20 years old in 1855. He must have been a resourceful young man as the family legend says that he was a scout for the wagon train walking all the way to Hangtown (Placerville). Naomi Toll was born in Blenheim, Ontario, Canada in 1840. She was 15 when John left Canada.¹

John tried mining for a while in the Iowa Hill area but decided that supplying the other miners with their needs would be more lucrative. He soon open a general merchandise store in Monona Flat Just two miles east of Iowa Hill. Monona Flat had a population of 320 in 1860.²

It wasn't until 1863 when John was 28 and Naomi was 23 that John sent for her to join him. They must have been corresponding by mail for eight long years. There is no record of John returning to Ontario but it might be possible. If so, you would think he would have brought Naomi back with him but instead we find Naomi traveling from Ontario to New York. From there she took a steamer to Panama and crossed the isthmus by mule where she boarded the steamer *Orizaba* to San Francisco. She arrived on May 9, 1863. She was met by her brother, Nelson Toll, who had come from Sacramento to meet her. They went by steamer up the river to Sacramento where Nelson owned a stable. Nelson's wife, Sarah, made a wedding dress for Naomi. John Smiley came down from Monona Flat with his freight wagon. Presumably, he and Naomi hadn't seen each other for almost a decade. They married in Sacramento in June of 1863.³

John and Naomi traveled all the way to Auburn in his freight wagon where John picked up supplies to take up to the mountains and he put Naomi on a stagecoach to Iowa Hill. The stage was much faster than John's freight delivery route, so Naomi made it to Iowa Hill days before John arrived. A store keeper in Iowa Hill took Naomi to John's cabin in Monona Flat. Just imagine being dropped off in a strange place in what would have been near wilderness, one can only imagine what was going through this young woman's mind. She was there for two days all alone before John showed up.⁴

John was successful with his store and with his brother, Albert, delivered goods to mines all over the Divide. Part of his success was due to his outgoing personality, the Placer Herald described him as follows: "everybody knows the good-natured, big-hearted, genial John Smiley..."⁵

By 1879, John and Naomi had a house, two store houses, a barn, a lot in Iowa Hill, a mining claim and a ditch. They also had six children, although two would die as infants and a boy aged thirteen died when a tree he was cutting down, fell on him.⁶

John Smiley died at age 64 in 1900. Naomi went to live with one of her daughters in Lone, California and she died in 1918 when she was 78 years old. Both of them are buried near their infant children and young John in the Iowa Hill Cemetery.⁷

With a story like this I am always amazed at the fortitude of the people that settled in Placer County during the earliest years. The young couple who waited so many years to be reunited, the courage of John to head out across the unknown Plains, the resolution of Naomi to travel hundreds of miles through treacherous lands on her own. It took a lot of grit to be a pioneer.

1 Doris Smiley Bristol, manuscript copy (n. d.) at Placer County Archives. Bob & Sharon Balmain, manuscript (n.d.) Placer County Archives

2 Bristol, 1860 census ,Wikipedia

3 Bristol, Balmain

4 Bristol, Balmain

5 *Placer Herald* Sept. 7, 1878

6 Balmain, mining claims book C, findagrave

7 findagrave, 1910 census

April McDonald-Loomis

