

Esther Birdsall Darling

When she summered at the big house in Aeolia Heights she was know as “Etta” but she became famous using her more formal married name: Esther Birdsall Darling.

Etta grew up in the wealthy household of Frederick and Esther Stratton Birdsall. Frederick was a prominent figure in early California history. In 1883 he bought a lovely tract of land overlooking the American River Canyon and named it Aeolia. Aeolus, is the Greek god of the winds. The name suggests a reference and recognition of the evening breezes that come down the canyon.

Knox-McDonald database, A. Albertazzi Auburn Journal 9 May 2012.

Etta grew up in a rarified atmosphere of wealth and privilege. The Birdsall’s divided their time between their house in Sacramento and the “ranch” on Aeolia Heights. At the house in Sacramento they employed three live-in servants to cater to their needs.

Census records Ancestry.com

As a girl she traveled to Europe with her father to learn about the Olive Oil industry and to buy the 5,000 to 8,000 plants that eventually came to be planted in Aeolia Heights. In 1922 she wrote of about life at the ranch and her love of animals: “by gift, annexation, or accident, there come into our possession at one time, in addition to our two collies and two cats, a monkey, a disable blue-jay, a mud turtle, an orphaned lamb, an abused and abandoned water spaniel and a white rat...”

Placer Herald 27 May 1922

Etta attended Mills College and after graduation she spent a number of years traveling: London, Paris, Constantinople, the Sahara desert, Mexico, Hawaii and the Orient.

Placer Herald 27 May 1922

In 1907, at the relatively late age of 38, she married Charles Edward Darling. Charles lived in and had a hardware business and, in Nome, Alaska since 1900 and it was in Nome that they began their married lives. One can only imagine what a change it was for Esther to find

herself in the Gold Rush town that had barely transitioned from tents to frame houses. But it was in Nome that Etta came into her own.

Placer Herald 27 May 1933

Charles was part owner of Dean and Darling Hardware. Besides selling all kinds of merchandise, they outfitted several Arctic expeditions. Charles had an interest in a dog kennel run by one of his employees, Allan Alexander "Scotty" Allan. When Etta arrived, she was instantly enamored with the sled dogs at the kennel. In 1908 she helped form the Nome Kennel Club," organized to improve the breed of sled dogs, and to promote a characteristic Arctic sport with the All Alaska Sweepstakes." Prior to this time dogs had not been bred for racing but for transportation and hauling freight.

Hardware World, 1918, Placer Herald 27 May 1922

The All-Alaska Sweepstakes was a 408 - miles round trip race from Nome to Candle, Alaska, and is the oldest organized distance sled dog race in the world. Racing times averaged about 80 hours

Northernlightsmedia.com

The Allan-Darling Kennel, with legendary musher "Scotty" Allan at the reins, never finished lower than third with three firsts and three seconds in the first eight years of the race. The Allan-Darling team was made up of mutts, what one writer called "lop-eared freighting dogs, mongrels." As the lead was a mixed breed dog named "Baldy" that Esther acquired from a starving boy she encountered in Nome who was trying to sell his equally starving dog to buy food for his family. Esther and "Scotty" took both boy and dog into their kennel.

Denverdogworks.blogspot.com, Baldy of Nome: Darling, litsite.org

In 1913, she wrote "Baldy of Nome" relating the story of "Baldy" and the sled dog world of racing. It was a huge success and is still in print today. She went on to write, "Navarre of the North", "Break-Up", and "For the Honor and Glory of France". The latter tells the story of Baldy's descendants purchased during World War I by the French Military. 450 dogs from Alaska, many from the Darling-Allan Kennel were shipped to France where they worked pulling ambulances, guarding munitions and serving as messengers and carriers. They were also used to run communications wires across difficult terrain. "During a blizzard which lasted four days and four nights, in the Alps, 90 tons of ammunition and supplies were transported by dog teams."

“The Allan-Darling Alaskan dogs have had their pictures painted and hung in the Museum of War in France in recognition of the wonderful service rendered.” Esther Darling received the War Cross won by her dogs in 1917.

HardwareWorld June 1918, New York Times 17 July 1917