

## The Betsy Ross of Horseshoe Bar

Sarah Capson was only 15 years old when she came to Horseshoe Bar with her father, Capt. Robert Capson and her mother Elizabeth. Her father put together a home that was part tent and part brush on the banks of the American River.



As it was nearing the Fourth of July, Mr. Sealey who had a boarding house on the Bar came up with idea of erecting a liberty flag pole so miners up and down the river could see the flag waving from Horseshoe Bar.

A committee of miners came to the house and asked if Sarah could make a flag for the occasion. They bought the material for her and she proceeded to make a large American Flag, no doubt aided by her mother.

Miners Charles O'Neil, who later became Chief of Police in Sacramento and Lorenzo Coombs, volunteered to get the pole, which was an astounding 100 feet long.

News of the event became known up and down the river. On the evening of July 4<sup>th</sup>, men from Smith's Bar, Rattlesnake Bar, Kentucky Bar, Oregon Bar, Granite Bar, Dolan's Bar, Long Bar, and Milk Punch Bar marched with torches toward Horseshoe Bar. It was said that nearly 500 men assembled. The men of many nations assembled and as the evening wore on, they all began to sing their own national songs, in their native languages, at the same time!

The flag raising was a success accompanied by the roar of artillery. They found a granite stone of some four feet square, buried it in the road in front of the flag pole and using an anvil and fuses, "fired salvos that could be heard for miles around." Miss. Capson was given the honor of "christening" the flag with a goblet of wine. As she did she gave a small speech of her own....."the Flag of our Union,

long may it be the hope of the oppressed and home of the free.” There was a band of eleven pieces made up from the miners and they played the Star-Spangled Banner.

A large barbecue followed. At about 3:00 in the morning, the miners picked up their torches and those who could, began walking back to their camps. It was said that in the long line of torch light, every once in a while, one would suddenly drop from sight and burn out on the ground, the bearer evidently unable to make it any further up the trail.

Sarah’s story of coming to California is like many others. Her father, Capt. Robert made the trip to California in 1849 or 50, his ship carried portable houses and building material to San Francisco. His trip took seven months to complete. Upon arrival, most of Capt. Capson’s crew deserted. He was able to find another captain who agreed to return his vessel back to New Orleans for him and the Captain headed off to the mining grounds. He was evidently quite successful and send home a large quantity of gold dust and nuggets. Young Sarah took some samples to her school and caused quite a sensation. The Captain was anxious to have his family join him in California and mother and daughter left on the steamer *Empire City* on February 12, 1852.

On board the steamer, there were several hundred men and five women including Sarah and her mother Elizabeth. Arriving in Chagres they began the isthmus journey in canoes called bungos, poled through the shallow water by natives. Upon reaching Gorgona, they secured burros and continued the journey. When they arrived in Panama City, they were astounded to find some 8,000 people, mostly men, waiting for a ship to take them to San Francisco. Many had been waiting for such a long time that they had run out of money or had become discouraged about making the journey. The Capsons ran into some friends from New Orleans, who were giving up and returning home. They were able to buy steamer tickets from their friends. They still had to wait some eighteen days in Panama City, during which time, a riot broke out between the travelers and the natives. Several hundred men died in the riot.

They were finally able to get aboard a San Francisco bound ship, with four hundred men and five women. On the second day out, Panama Fever broke out among the passengers and within two weeks, thirty-eight men had died and were buried at sea. The conditions on board the ship were abysmal. There were no stewards and little food. Small companies formed to do the cooking. The ship’s stores provided what little food there was: Chili beans, potatoes, rice, dried meat and hard tack. The hard tack was so mildewed that they just threw it overboard. Everyone was limited to one pint of fresh water each day. During the last few days of the journey, all they had left to eat were Chile beans. It took 102 days to reach San Francisco where they were met by the Captain.

After a very short stay in San Francisco, a town with one street and many low wooden buildings, crowded with hundreds of men trying to find their way to the mines. They set sail up the Sacramento River on the steamer *Wilda*. Sacramento was even less appealing than San Francisco, it was filled with gambling houses, a few stores and some boarding houses. While there they saw a large oak tree on K Street, with six ropes hanging from a limb, where six criminals had recently been hung. The ropes were left as a warning to others.

They were able to take a stage as far as the Franklin House, run by John Wixon, in the present-day Loomis area. From the Franklin House they set out on foot to Horseshoe Bar. (*Author’s note: I was a little surprised to read this in the newspaper account, it would seem that by 1852, stage lines were running to all the bars along the river. Perhaps the family had run out of money by this time? Hard to say.*) Horseshoe Bar at the time the Capsons arrived was a thriving little camp. It was a trading center for the camps all up and down the river. It had stores, gambling houses, boarding houses and restaurants. In the 1852 election, 300 votes were tallied from this Bar.

By October of 1852 young Sarah had married an Irish miner named James Winter Smyth in Sacramento. Smyth had had his own perilous journey from Ireland to San Francisco. He too, had come via the Isthmus route where the eleven men he was traveling with all died of Panama Fever. He mined for a time in the Grass Valley area but then moved on to Horseshoe Bar where he evidently met Sarah.

In 1855 they opened a store on the Auburn and Folsom Road near the Franklin House. They were there when the big shoot-out occurred between the Tom Bell gang and a posse led by Sheriff John Boggs and Sheriff B. F. Moore. The robber Ned Conway was shot and Sarah's father who had known the man's family back in New Orleans helped his son-in-law give Conway a decent burial, alongside the Auburn – Folsom Road beneath a large oak tree.

By 1860, the Smyth's were back in Horseshoe Bar where James managed to turn the course of the river some twenty-eight times in order to mine the river bed. He also started a large orchard and eventually had thirty acres in fruit trees. He brought oranges trees from the Los Angeles area and was said to have planted the first orange tree in the county. (*author's note: this is an accomplishment that has at least three other claims.*)

Sarah and James would have ten children. Their sons would run the successful Smyth Brothers Nursery in Loomis for many years.

Both Sarah and James are buried in the Red Men's Cemetery in Newcastle. Sarah had died in 1921 and James in 1908.

*The above story was taken mostly from an account in the Placer Herald from March 12, 1921 upon Sarah's death. Other items were picked up from Bill Wilson's Gold and Schemes, The History of Placer and Nevada Counties by Lardner and Brock, and various other newspaper articles at newspapers.com.*

### Tom Bell and Ned Conway

There is a fascinating story in *The History of Placer County* by W. B. Lardner and M. J. Brock, they had access to a Smyth family diary and report the following:

The reason the posse was looking for the Bell gang was because of the murder of a Jewish peddler named Rosenthal. According to the diary, the Bell gang had been at the Smyth's store on Horseshoe Bar. Evidently because of Conway's relationship to the Capson family in New Orleans, the store was safe from the robbers. Bell, posing as a cattle man, a very attractive and sociable fellow, was at the store. Mr. Smyth had a "excellent violin" and Tom Bell asked if he could play it. Smyth agreed and it turned out that Bell was quite an accomplished musician. The gang spent a week near the store and Bell played every night. Toward the end of the week the peddler, Rosenthal, arrived. Mrs. Smyth bought a few things from him and in paying him with a ten-dollar gold piece, Rosenthal made it known that he was carrying about \$4,000 in cash. That evidently proved too much temptation for the gang. As Rosenthal left Horseshoe Bar, the gang attacked him, stole his money, his horse and all his goods. They then tied him to a tree and left him to die. Bell, evidently changed his mind a bit later and saying "dead men tell no tales", went back and shot the peddler. It was after this murder that the Sheriff's posse set out after the Bell gang and Ned Conway was murdered. Tom Bell escaped and was never heard from again.

## Captain Robert Capson

In spite of the story reported in the newspapers and in the pages of Lardner and Brock there is a competing story about the captain. This one also found in Lardner and Brock. They state that Captain Robert Capson (how many of them could there have been?) and a Captain Kidd came to Sutter's Fort in 1847. They outfitted themselves with a canoe and trapping gear. They headed up the American River getting as far as Horseshoe Bar where they set up camp and where game was "abundant." They set out on foot and quickly came to what they thought was another river. Further investigation proved it to be the same river just that it made a "horseshoe bend." The river became too turbulent to travel with their canoe so they left the canoe and most of their gear along with a sign designating the place as "Horseshoe Bend."

The two sailors continued on their way across mountains to the South Fork where they heard that a man named Marshall was building a saw mill. Upon arriving they found a large gathering of men hugely excited about the discovery of gold. The sailors quickly decided to head back to their camp on the Bend and gather their equipment and start hunting for gold. Upon arriving at the Bend, they found a group of Mormon men using a rocker made from the canoe they had left to collect gold from the river. A fight ensued, Captain Kidd was killed but Captain Capson escaped. He made it back to Sutter's Fort. A group of men set out for the Bend but found nothing except Captain Kidd's body, which they buried. That is how Horseshoe Bar got its name.

*Author's note: I couldn't find anything that would confirm either account of Capt. Capson's story. He either came earlier than the family's story or there were two Capt. Robert Capson's in Horseshoe Bar in the very early days of the Gold Rush. History can be so confounding!*