

# WIFE AT PORT ISABEL

## A Pioneer Woman's Colorado River Letters

By Franks S. Dolley, M.D. (1958)

**Of both human interest and historic value are the letters written in 1870-72 from Port Isabel near the mouth of the Colorado River by Captain David C. Robinson's wife Ellen to members of her family in Maryland. Port Isabel, a little known shipyard built in 1865 by the Colorado Steam Navigation Company for the maintenance and construction of its steamers, has long since vanished, but during the 1860's and 1870's it was the busiest Pacific Coast port excepting that of San Francisco. The letters, edited by Westerner Frank S. Colley and shown here in abbreviated form were obtained from Captain Robinson's daughter, Margaret Robinson who is still living.**

During the turbulent period of the 1860's and 1870's when the Colorado Steam Navigation Company was the only practical common carrier between the Pacific Cost and Arizona Territory, Port Isabel, situated in a deep, narrow slough at the mouth of the Colorado River, and extending into the Sonoran Desert, was, save for that of San Francisco, the busiest port of the Pacific Coast.

Here from the earliest days of the shipyard's existence dwelt David C. Robinson, ship's carpenter and veteran captain and pilot of Colorado River steamers.

In 1869, Captain Robinson visited Maryland, the land of his birth. During this visit he met, and following a brief courtship married, Ellen Hayes, an attractive girl many years his junior who had never been more than 50 miles away from her home. The thought of conditions under which she would have to live, for a time at least, presumably seemed of little importance to her; nor did the Captain give serious thought of the effect upon Ellen of the dreadful contrast between the lovely Maryland countryside and the utter desolation of the Colorado River delta where they must make their home.

And soon on August 24, 1869, with family and friends about them they were married in the village church, setting out a once by train on the long journey west for a life that was to hold so much happiness and sorrow for her.

The first opportunity for the bride to write back to her mother came upon her arrival at the Union Hotel in Pittsburg. "He (Captain Robinson) is now taking a nap." She wrote. "I have his watch by me to call him in an hour's time. He is all that fancy painted him and *more* and I believe he would like it better if I only had more *wants* as he is do kind and attentive..."

In all the letters Ellen never referred to Captain Robins, her husband, other than as Mr. R. or as Mr. Robinson.

It would seem that excitement and fatigue of her early honeymoon days and the changing panorama of the landscape viewed from the car window of her slow moving train combined to postpone her next letter until the one postmarked San Francisco.

San Francisco, September 3, 1870

My dear Mother:

We arrived here yesterday evening, the second, very tired and dirty. You can scarcely form an idea how black with dust we were. Our hair was more like dried broomcorn than anything I can compare it to. It took a great deal of soap and water to make me presentable. I stood the journey pretty well but I think I could hardly have stood another day's ride on the cars. It is such a relief to get on the steamboat in Oakland, which is opposite San Francisco. It was so cool and nice...

I have so much to tell you of our journey here but do not feel settled enough to begin at present. It became very tiresome crossing the plains in Wyoming territory. So little variation in the scenery. Sleeping cars are fitted up with every accommodation and are very comfortable but they seem so cramped that the last two days of our journey on them, I thought sometimes I would give almost anything in the world to get to walk three or four miles just to see if I could ever get tired of exercise. I walked about the cars a good deal and even listened to two or three babies cry with a good deal of interest. The *dear little things*, they did what they could to enliven the scene. You would be surprised to know how many go and come to California. I met no less than four ladies coming to California to meet their husband; two had ever so many children, two had none... Tell Han (Hannah, her sister)... I am as happy as a bird (I always think them the happiest things in creation). Mr. Robinson is certainly one of the best of men. Never seen a frown on his brow about anything and so kind and good and loving. What a happy life is in prospect for me if I can only be worth of him and I mean to try to be. He looks so handsome and so fine looking. He is letting his beard grow. I am so sorry that he did not have it when he was in Hartford, that he might seem younger than his 50 years. It adds very much to his appearance. I must close. Mr. R. has just

come up to take me to dinner. He sends his love to all of you. Give my love to all inquiring friends...I do hope there will be two or three letters for me when we arrive at our home. With much love your affectionate daughter,

Ellie M. Robinson

In the following letter Ellen's determination to face without complaint whatever might confront her becomes at once apparent, with no reference to the squalid settlement in which she finds herself. Ellen bravely continues the description of her journey west.

September 17, 1870 Fort Yuma or Arizona City. Saturday afternoon.

My dear sister,

We arrive here Thursday evening a little after sundown so tired and dirty that you would not have known me could you have seen me. Mr. R. you might have known, he being of such proportions that the dirt failed to conceal him only obliterated the clearness of his physiognomy. But I will commence at the beginning of my journey, or rather from Pittsburgh, as I wrote from that place. Well we left that horrid dirty place on Friday afternoon, the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, arrived at Council Bluffs on Sunday morning before noon, crossed the Missouri River in a steamboat to Omaha, went to a hotel where had to delay for some hours. The house was full. We could not get a room but a lady who with her husband was putting up there for a time very kindly invited me to her room, had fresh water and towels brought. After washing and changing my clothes, I felt very much refreshed and ready to start afresh which we did immediately after dinner. Omaha is quite nice looking place, will be a handsome city after awhile. I think it could *now*, there are more handsome men that can be found in half a dozen other states combined. I stood at the window some time watching them and saw but one who was in anyway homely and there were some magnificent *beards* which was quite an item, I think, be to resume my journey. We arrived in the city of Ogden the following Tuesday evening whereupon asking the hackman that came rushing at Mr. R. to take us to the best hotel in the city, which he promised to do to the best place possible, showed us the way to his hack which was an old covered wagon with a very uncertain floor. We felt every time he bounced over a stone that my feet would surely find *terra firma* and with one's head rubbing the top we were not sorry after ten or fifteen minutes' ride to alight almost anyplace. The *outside* of the hotel look more inviting than any other place we noted as we rode to it but when we went to our room found they believed in making clean the outside of the platter,

or on account of the increase in travelers, I suppose, the inside had been partitioned off into very small rooms. The partitions were made up of very rough boards, coarse muslin and paper for variety, great big cracks and a big hole over the door *intended for glass*. And then we had for next door neighbors a couple of fellows who were agreeable as a couple of horses. When Mr. R. entered the room, as he gave a look around he caught my hand and just looked at me as if to say, "What do you think of me for bringing you to such a place." The answer was a hearty laugh in which he joined and I laughed until I nearly cried. I made a short investigation, found the bed uninhibited but with soiled sheets which was soon remedied. We then went down to the parlor where the flies were so thick we had a most busy time keeping them from biting and scratching us. But our attention was soon diverted from them by the call to supper which I at least gladly obeyed and it was, indeed, a good thing that I am favored with a voracious appetite for the cup and saucer which was more like a big bowl, a wash bowl, was ridged with *black* and a streak of fly specks. The dining room was set with small tables, seating about four persons. We always had one to ourselves. There was a place cut in the wall of the kitchen and our waiters were a man and a little boy, Welch, would take our orders and go to this place and called for the cook and in a short time we had coffee, two or three kinds of bread, roasted potatoes, meat nicely cooked with spices of different kinds which almost took my breath at first and onions seemed to be in almost everything. When I sat down at the table, everything struck me in such a ridiculous light that I took a right good laugh, would have given something if I could have indulged. Mr. R. seemed to feel badly that we had gotten into such a poor place on my account but I told him variety was the spice of life and I would not have missed it for a good deal.

Next morning, after eating a right hearty breakfast, we started for Salt Lake City, which is about 28 miles from Ogden. Upon arriving, we took a hack, a very nice one, and went to a very pleasant hotel and in about an hour the same hackman took us around to see whatever was to be seen in the time we intended to spend there...

Here follows a good description of the city, the tabernacle, the temple being built, the sulphur baths, Brigham Young's residence, the wide street, etc.

Your loving sister, Ellie

Ellen is determined to permit no word of complaint or of her homesickness to enter her letters. Nothing is said of the wretched condition under which she has just finish a letter home; the use of the pencil rather than a pen, for probably neither pen nor ink was available. Ellen passes

over completely the exhaustion of the dreadful trip by stage over the 70 odd miles of desert between San Diego and Fort Yuma, nor does she mention her feeling of apprehension that must have existed as she faced the continuance of her journey down the Colorado River, 175 miles by steamer to Port Isabel.

Port Isabel, October 2, 1870

My very dear mother:

As you will see by the date this is Sabbath morning. The steamer has just come in, bringing your and Floy's letters and oh so welcomed are they. Yours was dated 12<sup>th</sup> Sept. so it takes about 20 days for a letter to reach me and I suppose it takes the same length of time for mine to reach you. I am sorry I did not persevere more and write oftener but I did not know then it took so long a time for a letter to go and I felt so unsettled when I stopped that I deferred it when I should not have done so. When we arrived in San Francisco I felt quite tired and dull and slept a good deal of the time. Monday evening—WHEN I got this far Mr. R. came in and I laid my pen aside as it was rather late. The weather is very warm here and I get tired against night so that I do not feel like writing or doing anything but trying to get cool. But all say the weather will soon be getting cooler now, there was a very hot wind blew all day yesterday so that in the afternoon I could not read. In speaking of reading reminds again of me neglecting to bring my small Bible and the Testament Aunt Amelia gave me, that looked badly but I left them until the last as they were lying in sight, but Mr. R. has a very nice one, pleasant to hold and pleasant print. The print of mine was too fine to read with comfort. Will have to stop a little while again, the bell has rung for supper. Well, now it is nearly dark and I will have to hasten. I intend to write one to some of you by every steamer and some of you write to me often. *Do not wait* to receive one from me. Mr. R. introduced me to a number of his friends. Captains and their families. I was much pleased with Captain McDonough's wife. I expect she will be down here in the course of two weeks, her husband is the Captain of the Josephine. It sails from San Francisco to this port. He brings our trucks and furniture. I did not bring but one calico dress with me and my light suit and when I got to Fort Yuma found it so warm and I got a calico there, made it last week... Cannot wear anything but calico or lawn at this time. The perspiration takes the color out of it so cannot wear it except when it is a little cooler... Tell Han to write me a long letter. Oh how I do want to see you all but it cannot be. I am determined to be contented, could not well help it with such a husband as I have. He often talks of when we will go

home. The boat is just about to leave. Give Pap a great deal of love from me, and also my brave sister, Han and child, Floy. Love to all inquiring friends...

Your affectionate daughter,

E.H. Robinson

Port Isabel, October 3, 1870

My dear:

You should have been the recipient of a letter from me at a much earlier date but was waiting to arrive at *home*, when I could put my mind upon it, but in looking around at my new house and the place in which it is situated allowed the steamer to leave. Your letter was not ready so put it off until it came in again which was last night. We live 160 miles from the post office which is at Arizona City, and the steamers take and bring our mail which is about once in eight days. The mail is taken from A. City across the desert a distance of 180 miles in a stage to San Diego, from there is a steamship to San Francisco, being delayed en route but when it arrived in San F. it goes home in seven days... Now I will give the rest of my journey to you... (Here follows a description of her cross-country trip, climaxed by her enjoyment of San Francisco, the wonders of the place, the food, the fruit. Then a steamer took them to San Diego.) We had to stay in San Diego until the next evening, about 8 o'clock when we took the stage for Fort Yuma. We were two days and two nights in the stage. I was glad there was not another day riding. The first night I did not sleep at all not the next day, but the night following I slept almost all the time. We stopped several times through the night and day to change horses and to water them, and at the stations where they stopped to change horses we could get our supper, dinner and breakfast, as the case might be. I will now have to close. Mr. R. has just come in for the third time since I commence to write...I would like to see you all. I often dream about you and dreamed about every one of you the other night. I am very, very happy in my new life. Mr. R. is one of the excellent ones of the earth. I often wonder if I will be a good enough wife for him and I will try to be like Mother. Write soon to me: Now do. Letters are the only connection between me and my Maryland home...I have written so long my hand gets tired. Goodbye, dear friend with much love to all.

Your affectionate friend,

E. H. Robinson

October 17, 1870

My own dear mother:

The Steamer Colorado has just come in, bringing your welcomed letter. I kept telling myself all the time that I did not look for a letter, for I so much feared to be disappointed but I believe I was looking for it after all... Will write to everyone, but do not get out of patience (will finish this sentence directly.) Have just paused to devour an apple. A little box was brought in a little while since with my name outside and Mr. R. has just come in to open it and saying it was a box of apples sent to me by Mrs. Polhamus, a Mexican lady, the wife of a gentleman where we stopped in Arizona City, or as it is generally spoken of, Fort Yuma. It was an unexpected kindness to me for which I feel grateful. Apples are a great treat here and for me, a stranger in a strange land, it was a nice present. I shall share them with my friend Mrs. McDougall, who is just as kind as it is possible for her to be to me. She seems to think it a great favor to do anything for me and her husband is just as kind. I still go there for my meals and they make it very pleasant. He often has some funny things to tell us of his younger days that causes me a hearty laugh, but to resume where I left off. Do not be uneasy if it is a long time, sometimes before you receive a letter from me, for it takes the boat longer to make the trip this season of the year. There are often adverse winds and many things to cause delay but write often as ever, whenever you can, all of you. It is such pleasure to hear from you.

Your affectionate daughter,

Ellie

October 17, 1870

My dear sister:

Have just received your welcomed letter to find it is a short one, indeed. Do hope they will not be like heavenly visitants but rather like seed time and harvest that never *fail*. I am happy to think that you had a little visit but I should have been home with Ma. It seems so strange that I am not there. Sometimes, I find myself wondering how I could leave her and you and Floy and Pap. But for all, I do not feel that I have done anything ungrateful or wrong. Otherwise I would not be so happy and contented for it takes a very slight thing to make me very unhappy and if I had done wrong in leaving all, I would be too wretched to live. I have never

been homesick yet, to cry. Tears come but I will drive them back and think of something bright and soon I am cheerful as ever, for I do not want Mr. R. to see me said for a minute... I would love to see my home, to see you, all the flowers, my flowers. I often think of them, can almost imagine smelling them at times. I am coming home some day. Often dream of being home. But there is always a feeling that I am going away, an indefinable feeling.

Have the Penstamen any seed? If so, send me two or three and some seed of that large cockscomb inside the garden gate. I have not any place picked yet for flowers but hope will have and if they will only grow. If the air is not too salt for them. Mr. R. is going to bring down some fresh earth from up the river. Just imagine a place where there is not a tree nor a stone as large as a pea, not a bit of anything green as far as the eye can reach excepting a little salt grass along the very edge of the river and a row of one storied houses, consisting of first a cook house. Then a meat house, then the mess room, then the store room where there is lots of canned oysters, peaches, tomatoes, green bean, peas, corn, salmon, fish, sardines, blackberries, whortleberries, gooseberries, and all kinds of jams and jellies. Then our room, then the office, then our house; that is, as soon as Mr. R. can get the carpenters at work. Then Mrs. Dougall's. Then in front of this is a carpenter shed and piles of lumber while still further, first is a drydock, to build and repair boats, and a blacksmith shop—and you have Port Isabel—my house at least the principle part of it, for back of it are the hen house, hog house, water tank and an old steamboat that is used for lodging for the men and a good house it makes. Captain Overman, of the Colorado, has just sent me up a nice muskmelon. It tastes like a cantaloupe. Everyone has been very kind to me. Being attracted by the noise of many feet, I glanced out the door and saw 21 pigs, large and small, marching by. He has over 40. We have fresh port every week. I will certainly grow fat if eating has anything to do with it, for I eat everything that comes in my way, almost. It is said to be very healthy here, everybody looks so... You write soon. You can have plenty to say if you will only say it. Give my love to Pap and Ma and yourself.

These letters reveal Ellen's homesickness. Her nostalgia in writing in great detail of their garden in Maryland. The utter desolation of the country about her home in Port Isabel. One's admiration for the determination and bravery of this Maryland girl transplanted to one of the loneliest places in America (Mexico) continues to grow with the reading of these letter. A letter written home on December 10 must have been lost for the next one preserved was dated December 25, 1870:



*Read this to yourself.* My Own dear Ma:

Long 'ere you receive this you will have gotten the very miserable one of December 10<sup>th</sup>, written by the kitchen stove with a lead pencil, telling you how poorly Mr. R. was. Well, he suffers so much at night, could not die down at all and could not get ease sitting up. It showed him to be so much worse than ever, that he concluded to go to Fort Yuma to see the doctor. I arose, got his breakfast, packed him up some clothes and he started. He was gone just eleven days. I was terribly lonely. But was comforted by the thought that it was for his good. Perhaps he would come home much better, which he did. Dr. said it was rheumatism of the muscle, gave him liniment with which I rubbed him every night but he is far from well. Think he will improve faster when the weather gets warmer. He has been very cold, has moderated some but oh, it is nothing like home. Yet the north wind is scorching. He took cold coming home. He was so very cold on the river. I have been making syrup for him and he is getting better. The rheumatism has weakened him considerably. He is very quiet but no wonder, he never complains. I have to question him earnestly to find out how he is. But then he is so much better than he was two weeks ago that I think surely will not be long before he is well. He came home two days sooner than I expected him and when they said there was a steamer in sight, wasn't I glad. They saw her smoke about 5 o'clock and it must have been near 7 before she came in. The evening was clear and with his glass I could when the boat entered the slew. (I cannot find this word in the dictionary but write it as it is pronounced.) Could see the light, like a large star. Mrs. McD. came in and sat to help me pass the time until the boat came out. The tide was out and when it got close up, I might say to the door, it dragged on the ground and only about two boat lengths from her morning place. Then they had to heave as they call it. Draw her to her place with ropes and it seemed a long, long time to wait but think least it was not more than half an hour. He brought me Floy's letter, mailed November 21<sup>st</sup>, and your mailed November 28<sup>th</sup> and a bundle of working clothes and the unexpected and highly prized gift and the crochet needles came so nicely. I take it and the letters for my Christmas gift from home and am rich and proud of them. One end of the carton was torn open. Mr. R. says he thought it was a bundle of greenbacks. Wonder if they thought Mr. R. had married an heiress. The letters were a great treat, such nice full ones and I like you to write everything you do. Although it is a tax on you when you have so much to do but it is a great enjoyment for me. Tell Han to write me soon and tell me everything new she gets and has made and what she has been doing this winter up to this time in the way of pretty things... Was weighed about the first of October, weighed 113...think now I would come nearer to 130. I have the most trouble with my clothes, making them large. Just finishing a new calico... I would have told you before how fleshy I am

growing but feared you might weave a little about me but have concluded that older married people than I will find no cause for suspicion... I never had such good health in my life. Mr. R. seems quite fond of me but I think I will lose and more than I have gained when the warm weather comes for people perspire here so much, you have no idea. I am so thankful for my good health. It makes life so bright... I often think of you on cold days while here the coldest weather we have only makes ice a half inch thick, I do wonder how you spent Christmas day, very quiet I expect... While Mr. R. was gone, Mrs. Mac did everything in her power to make me feel less lonely, came in of night and sat and talked to me and made the time pass. I could not leave *my house* after sundown. I will quit writing now. Am tired.

Continuation of letter of December 25<sup>th</sup> 1870 written as a part but added a week later:

Have not had an opportunity to send this letter to the office. Fear you will become impatient when you do not get a letter for a long time. Do not be the least uneasy for there is not the least certainty about the boats. It has been lying here 12 days now and every prospect that she will stay here 6 or 7 more. She is waiting for a vessel from San Francisco and it is not even in sight yet. After she comes in it takes two days or more to get to her place where the barge is to load from her unless the wind is very favorable, then two days to load the barges, then the teamer tows the barge to Fort Yuma which takes from 2 ½ to 4 days. So you see even when my letter gets started from here, it is some time before it is mailed. This has been a most lovely day. Our coldest weather is now over, these three or four warm days are like our warm May days at home.

I am happy to you Mr. R. is very much better. The pain does not bother him much until about 4 o'clock in the morning and then not severe. I am so *glad* and *thankful*. He looks much better than he did but does not feel strong. And, Ma I must tell how dear and good he is. Yesterday I was not *well*. You know how I always am for a day. In the morning I cut around pretty much getting everything ready for Sunday and when he came in in the evening, I was lying down. I told him I felt badly and oh, Ma, he was so apprehensive that I must feel sad or lonely that I have someone that loves me and will care for me always. He then in a short time made tea and set the table all so quietly. He was more gentle than most women. He then came and told me it was ready and I got up to eat. Then this morning he rose and got breakfast. Cooked codfish and several things and made coffee, then came and wanted to know if I would have some breakfast brought in. I told him to eat his and let everything be and I would fix it all up. He then brought me some warm water, as the water in the pitcher was very cold to wash in. He did all this without me saying a word. Oh, Ma, it is a great pleasure to live with him

but, Ma, I do not say anything more about him than I can help as I do not want any praise of him to sound anything like two cousins that I could name, but he *merits* far more praise than you have heard of him. Now, Ma, be sure and keep all this secret between yourselves for if you tell anyone, at least *anyone* except H, they will listen with *rapt* attention and then go away and ridicule me and make jokes and I do not like to be ridiculed. I do not care for myself alone. I write to you almost as I would talk. You need never be uneasy about me. He will take as good care of me as mortal can after that, we must submit without complaining to all things. Wish I had written on a large sheet. Would have done so but though I had not much to say. The paper is so stiff do not like to put more than a sheet and a half in. Have filled this with the one subject, *myself and my other half, a wonderful subject* but my mother will have patience with it, but will try and write a better hand next time and give myself room. Will not say goodbye yet.

Ellie



PORT ISABEL—1865-1878 As reconstructed by Clarence Ellsworth. “Just imagine a place...with one storied houses: At one end the dry dock to build and repair river boats (Colorado II on ways), then a blacksmith shop, then a carpenter shed, then Captain McDougall’s house, the Captain Robinson’s under construction, then our present living quarters, then the store house, then mess room, then meat house. To the rear the hen and hog houses, water tank and the old steamboat (Cocopah No. 1 used as lodging for the men—and you have Port Isabel.”

With improvement in Captain Robinson’s condition, Ellen writes with much less anxiety. Apparent satisfied with the culinary facilities at Port

Isabel, she suggests extensive improvements in her old Maryland kitchen that would lessen the household duties and cares of her mother.

February 7, 1871.

My dear Ma:

I received yours of Jan first on Friday the third of February, also one from Floy... I have been thinking much lately about your getting a new stove. I think one just like mine would be plenty large enough although it is a little thing, the baker will bake as much at one time as our big old thing and if I have a little fire, enough to keep it warm, it is warm enough to bake a loaf of bread with three or four at most little sticks of wood. Not much larger than my wrist and heats the irons so easily on top, boil the kettle and bake cakes on the griddle and all without removing the lid, or working with it in the least. Oh, you do not know what an *abomination* you have in that old stove. Mine is called a Victor #6, I expect #7 better for you. The only thing about mine is the spider is so small. If I had one two to supper just with the one it would be unhandy but you have *such* a nice spider, always keep it. There is never any need of taking off the lid to put this spider on. Just set it on top. Now if you only had a new stove, a washing machine and wringer and last but not least, a sink like Jenny's, the kitchen would be *furnished*.

I am happy to tell you Mr. R. is considerably better today, can lie down and be at ease, has been sleeping a good deal since breakfast. Do trust the medicine will cure him. He says [it] is not neuralgia, says he had that once in his head and arms, was nothing like this. Cured it by a few applications of towels wrung out of hot water and bound on his head. After reading your letter I figured it was that and told him that it was, he told me he had it once which only made me fear (the) more it was neuralgia. Last night I took one of his bathing towels, a very thick towel, wrung out of scalding water and put it something like a poultice, then took a small blanket and put over it to keep the heat in. Did that two nights but did not do him the least good. I had to discontinue it as the medicine he is taking has sulphur and salt peter in it. He wears thick flannel drawers and shirt. He has always been a remarkable hearty man, a strong constitution, thinks he can stand anything. The first of this that he felt was last winter. He was running the boat and there was a very cold spell of weather, water froze in the wheel-house where he stands all day long steering the boats and no fire, it was then he felt the first of it and no wonder, he has exposed himself I think... I must close. It is nearly dinner time. With much love to you and Pap and the rest.

I am your affectionate daughter.

Ellie

Despite Ellen's efforts to conceal her anxiety over Captain Robinson's condition, the light tone of the following letter is very far from convincing.

Colorado River, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1871

My dear mother:

We are now steaming up the river to Fort Yuma and I am in the cabin writing this, which will account for my pen not always obeying my will as it is rather shakey. Mr. R. is going up to see the Dr., he wrote Dr. telling him how he was and to send him some medicine. The Dr. wrote Mr. R. a very nice note by return boat telling him if possible to come up, he wished to examine him again, as he thought he had not understood his disease... I picked up our clothes and early Friday morning we started and this is Monday and we will not get to Yuma before tomorrow evening, a long trip. The boat is towing a heavily laden barge and we are detained occasionally... You would scarcely know Mr. R. if you should see him. Instead of the erect man he was, he is quite bent. The pain in his heart has been so severe and left him so that he cannot straighten himself but for all, I do not think he is in a dangerous way and I think when the doctor sees him again he will be able to cure him, just seeing him once and not studying his symptoms any, it is no wonder he did him no good. You must not worry anything about it, it will do no good, and I am enough to worry about it, I did not tell you until he got so bad, I thought I ought to. I am glad you write me such nice long letters... I have no pieces of paper with me, write soon to your affectionate daughter Ellen.

[Postscript] I hope I will get a letter from some of you when I get to Fort Yuma, if we stay there a few days I will write again, and let you know about Mr. R. He does not know yet whether he will return at once with this boat or wait for another. Ma, I send you one of Mr. R's. photos, he had taken several years since. He thinks you will hardly know him with the beard but it is just like him. I feel so provoked when I think of him having his beard off when we were married. It made him look so much older. He has a nice beard now, just like his photo and he does not look a day older, as if old. No I believe his photo now would look younger than this one. You see his collar is very loose, this causes him to look not so neat as he does in a close fitting one. That is the way they wear them here to be cool.

Ellie

Sent according to the envelope from Arizona City March 27.

Wednesday, March 22, 1871

My dear mother:

I received your of the 18<sup>th</sup> of February last week and I allowed the boat to leave without sending a letter. To tell you the truth, I forgot and how I came to do so I do not know unless it was that my mind was so taken up wishing the boat would get off so as to bring me a letter back. Anyway, I did not think of it until the boat had been gone a day. It started yesterday. Well it has not yet returned but it will surely come this evening but I do not look for a letter as I must not, I suppose, as an unexpected barge came down last week and brought me your letter so it would not be reasonable to look for another but whenever Floy relieves of her budget of news I should like to have some of the richest scraps although I would not object in the least to having the whole budget and she did not get her photograph taken... Before I write anything more I must tell you of Mr. R. He is still very poorly, is now very weak and is anxiously looking for the steamer back as he intends to go to San Francisco and if she arrives this evening will start tomorrow as the barge is ready and waiting for her. He expects to be gone two months and I expect I will have a desperate fight with the blues but I intend to try and keep up my spirits for I think surely he will find a physician that will understand his case. I do not now believe his heart has anything to do with it. There was a man at Fort Yuma affected the same way with several slight exceptions and the Dr. there told him he had rheumatism, then enlargement of the liver, but as he continued to grow worse he went to San Fran. last September. We met him as we came across the desert. He then tried one doctor after another, growing weaker all the time until he came to the 11<sup>th</sup> doctor, who was a Frenchman. He examined him and said it was the bile on his stomach had collected and had become caked. He gave him a medicine which in a week's time broke it up and he got better at once and as the brig, Josephine with Captain McDonnough was ready to sail, he came down here and said he is as well as ever and I would not be at all surprised if that is the matter with Mr. R. I do hope it will prove nothing more serious. I dread that ride for him across the desert. I have made him a little pillow that he may lay his head down when he gets a chance and I do hope the stage will not be full then he can make himself more comfortable. He will write to me from San Diego.

Captain McDonnough and his wife spent the day with me on Saturday, Monday and yesterday. She brought me some grapes and a couple of books so they will be great amusement while Mr. R. is absent. She is very kind. A good many here look for her coming as she always brings them papers of different kinds and distributes them around which is a great treat. This now forms a news depot in Fort Yuma but the papers are very high and I do not know what kind of selection they keep but I know they keep no very early papers. Mrs. McD. gave me her canary bird. It is a gay little thing and sings so sweetly. I find it cheers me very much. Keep in on the porch in the daytime and in the sitting room at night. It will sit on its top perch, looking so pert till I take the light out of the room for a few minutes. When I come back it has its little head tucked under its wing and looks like a little yellow ball. She gave it to me as she expects to go home to Maine on a visit and a lady is to give her another when she comes back. Well, I suppose the grass is beginning to show green. Oh! Ma, you *cannot realize* the pleasure it is to see the grass getting green and the flowers and the birds singing and oh so *many* beautiful things unless you were in a place like this for awhile. I never knew how rich I was until now when sometimes I think I would give anything almost to have just *one frog* as at home. We do not have any here. I know Floy will laugh at my wish but I hope she may never be any place where there is not even a frog. But now I have the little bird; perhaps I will *not* so long for other things. But send me some violets when they bloom. Both the colors and the purple retains its scent a long time. Excuse this scribbling and my unarranged sentence for I have not time to do better. At least I think I have not. Have to throw my pen down to attend to things. Threw it down some times since to prepare some clams for clam chowder that I intend to have for supper. Tell Pap I can eat clams like I had been born and bred on a clam flat. The way we have them for breakfast is to put them in a pan and set them in the oven and in ten minutes the heat open the shell and then we take them out at once and sit down to breakfast and take them out of the shell as they want them. Oh! But they are nice and not long since we had some venison. It was nice but I did not care about it. The nicest thing of the game kind that I have eaten since I have been here was a rabbit. A gentleman with several other men went away off to the California shore to hunt and get clams but he got a rabbit and sent it to me. It was a very large one. I put it in salt and water awhile and fried it with onions and it was very nice. It made enough for us and plenty for Mrs. Mac's family but I must tell you a little about the Indians. Expect you will get tired of them. There has been trouble among them. Cocopah tribe, Mr. R's Indians, there is a white man among them and sells them whiskey (or did). Mr. R. sent him word to sell them no more. Do not know whether he heeded it or not. One of the squaws, Oruke, by name, quite a favorite with me because she could talk English quite well, got drunk and threatened to kill an Indian, when one of them killed her.

When we went up to Fort Yuma the boat stopped at Captain Coloron's place to take on wood and Oruke was there. She seemed so pleased to see me and bid me goodbye several times and it was the next day they killed her. They do not take much notice when a squaw is killed her and it made a general fight and as usual when there is any trouble they come to Captain R.

It looks to me as if they acknowledge him as their Chief. He said if he would go and live among them they would at once make him Head Chief. Well, one day, week before last, three or four Indians drove down to see him. One wounded man came to get Mr. R. to cure him. Mr. R. had him fed and taken care of until his wound healed which was only about a week but those who came to see him said if Captain R. would only speak, there would be no more fight and Mr. R. did *speak* all he knew but somehow they were not satisfied. He did not say that this and that was to make all peace again, but he did not know what to say so he could not find out all the trouble as they heard he was going away. Then on Monday evening about sundown, we saw a number coming. The old Chief and all the others mounted on horses and behind them some footmen. Mr. R. was sitting on the office porch and Mrs. McDonnough and I went up there to see them come up. They came near and tied their horses and then walked up. All the head ones shook hands with Mr. R. Then with Mr. and Mrs. McDonnough and then sat down. Mr. R. then gave them nearly a box of crackers and a couple of bags of flour. Then they all went off on their horses. Then we saw no more of them until next morning when about 8 o'clock, Mr. R. was sitting in his usual place on the office porch. I looked out the window and saw them going up to him. Some of them drew a bench up to him and seated themselves while others stood around him and other sat down on the floor and ground. I counted 27. I had to laugh to see Mr. R. sitting there like a judge, or like Grand Sachem. The chief would talk a little, then one of his men would interpret or to. Mr. R. is so used to them he made out to know what they said. Then when he replied, the Indians would interpret to his people. Mr. R. said the trouble now is that they will not mind Captain Coloron. He has no authority over them. They talked more than an hour and when they got through he told them he was going away awhile and he would leave me here and they must take care of me and let nothing hurt me. He says every one of them responded to that. A little while ago Mr. R. was lying down on the lounge. The old Chief came in and bid him goodbye and he shook hands with us and he went out and got him a chunk of meat and he was delighted. He said goodbye again and started. There are a good many here yet. They often come to the door for a drink of water, they can get none but what is given them. It is kept locked up.

Night. I laid this aside to get supper and have been reading and talking to Mr. R. since. Since he has just gone up to the office, a boat is coming but some distance off yet. I think, and it will take him away from me tomorrow. Till he gets



well I'll make myself contented. He wanted me to go to Fort Yuma and stay during his absence but I told him if it was not against his wishes I would rather stay here. Would not be so lonely at home as up there. He said I should do as I liked and if I wanted to go anytime, to go. Sick as he is, he thinks of my comfort and happiness. In every way he never forgets me but he is one of those who make no parade of anything. I am always learning something new about him and it all make his character brighter and he always says, "Ellen do not forget me in your letters home and tell them I am going to San Francisco." Just as if I could keep him out of my letters. Why I cannot keep him out of many lines of them. We are very much obliged to Pap for the wish he could send us a barrel of apples. I know we do justice to them but we get a few occasionally. Could have plenty but the sea voyage is too much for them. Half or more always rot. And, Ma, I am so much obliged to Toby for his kindness but nothing more than I expected from him for I was thinking the same thing I know you have been thinking. I knew where and *who* would see that I got to my home again if anything happened to my husband, but, Ma, if anything should ever happen to him and I should be left destitute, it would be because death would overtake him so suddenly and so unexpectedly that he would not have five minutes to provide for me and those minutes would be agony for him, that he was leaving me unprovided for but I cannot write anymore of this. It makes me cry. God has led me this far. I can surely trust him the rest of the way. Ma, do not say a word of this outside of the family. It would cause speculation and I do not suppose my friends often hit on the true motives I had in marrying Mr. R. but as I know and you know that is sufficient.

Thursday morning. Mr. R. starts today about 1 o'clock. He is about as usual this morning... This is a lovely day, just warm enough to sit with the door open. I have my bird on the porch and it sings so sweetly. I can really imagine there are beautiful green grass and trees. It makes the place different to me. I am always loath to quit writing to you but must close. With much love from Mr. R. and myself to you all. I am your affectionate daughter... Tell Floy to write me the funniest kind of a letter that I may receive by the last of May when Mr. R. comes home. I want something to make him laugh heartily... You're all so plainly present when I am writing to you... Would say something on all you wrote to me but I am so tired. I do not have any success with my flowers. The air is too salt. The seed will not come up and my lily grows slow and not at all like they grow at home. It grows more like a young duck. Good-night, dear Ma and Pap and sister. How cozy my old room at home seems when I think of it (which is often) and us three girls sitting on the floor in our nightgowns chatting, chatting away as if for *wages*. Well, when I come home I will sit there and make believe I am a girl again but I fear I shall look so much older I cannot deceive the rest of you for I do not

expect ever to be as fair again as I used to be. It is getting so dark here. Write when you can.

Your loving daughter,

Ellie

The following is a letter from Captain Robinson in the cramped hand of one unused to writing and will find no words other than those necessary to convey his message to the one whom he dearly loves:

San Francisco, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1871

Dear Wife:

I am still improving slowly. The pains have all left me but I am weak and not able to walk far without rest. My greatest trouble now is to stay in the house and I can't leave it without riding. The doctor says I am cured but must not leave until I gain strength. I hope this letter will find you well and in good spirits. I am very anxious to get back to you again but I don't think it advisable to come before I am strong. I am looking for a letter from you every day. This is the third one I have written to you. Don't get angry at this short letter. Don't think that I have forgotten you because there is not much in them.

Your affect husband.

(Signed)

D.C. Robinson

Port Isabel, July, 1871 [no day of the month given]

My own dear mother:

I have appeared to neglect you and very much fear you have been uneasy about me and Mr. R. First let me tell you I have been, and am still enjoying excellent health and you must not get uneasy and worry about me. I could tell you a whole list of reasons for not writing but am very much hurried to get this done to send down to the boat which is lying aside of the steamer from San Francisco which got here about noon today, and *which did not bring* my long-hoped husband

but instead a sweet letter from him which has revived my spirits to a great height, notwithstanding the disappointment experience upon finding he did not come. He says he is very much better, indeed almost well. The Dr. told him he needed his attention no longer but he advised him to stay in San Francisco until the 20<sup>th</sup> of this month when he might safely return to the river. He expects to be here the last of the month. I would not be surprised if it was some time after that. It will be if he come in the steamer for he will not sail from San Francisco until after the first of August and he may upon further thought remain to come that way. I wish he would for the journey across the desert is too much for him this time of the year, I think, but is very anxious to get home. Sailing vessels are taken off this line and a steamship put on service and it will arrive here regularly once a month. Captain McDonnough is the commander, I am glad of it. His wife did not go to see her friends. She did not come with him. I believe she is expecting to have a responsibility this fall. The steamer brought down a lot of soldiers, officers and their wives. Among the passengers, a Doctor Gildersleeve a surgeon of the Company, I believe. He came down last fall with soldiers and officers and we got acquainted with his boat. Well, he called on me today and told me he had seen Mr. R. and he was *so much* better. He brought me some oranges and told me of their passage down here and how pleasant it was and all about it. He is very pleasant and handsome man, has a most lovely wife. I have written this in such a rapid rate, I expect you will have to supply words and letters but have to send it away in two or three minutes. Write me when you can. I will write to you again. Give my love to Pap, Floy and all the brothers... Love to all inquiring friends, your loving daughter,

Ellie

Port Isabel, August 1, 1871

My dear mother:

It is just about sundown and Captain Overman just came by to tell me he is trying to get an Indian to go to Fort Yuma on business for him and that I would have an opportunity to send a letter if I wished, would not many minutes as he would have to get him started almost immediately or wait until sometime tomorrow, so I took a lead pencil as I can sit in the door and write faster with it. Mr. R. has not got home yet. I am looking for him every day now, when the last boat came down I heard by the Captain he intended to start from San Francisco the 20th of July and if he did, he is in Fort Yuma by this time and I know he is very anxious to get home. There is a boat up there that will be down some time but may not be for eight or nine days. In that case I expect he will come in a small boat for

which I will be sorry for the sun is so hot. I have not heard from him since I wrote you last. I keep very well. Have never been sick a day since I left home. This place, so far, agrees with me very well. It is quite damp sometimes but does not have any bad effects upon me. We have had a very pleasant summer and if we have no warmer weather this summer, I will think I am very fortunate for I did dread the summer. In 23 more days I will have been married one year. It seems a strange kind of a year, to be all at once removed so far from my home and it seems my one hope in life is to get back there again and see you all. I have been thinking of home all day and wondered if this August will look like last. I wonder if it is moonlight now and shining over that beautiful lily. But of course it is, for it is moonlight here and nearly as light as day. There is nothing here to make shadows, no dark corners made by trees or shrubbery so I have to imagine everything that is lovely. What a nice time you all are having, I expect Toby is home. How much I would like to be with you all. It is almost impossible to write a word for there are six or seven Indians gathered around me and chattering away at a great rate. Of course they enjoy my company and I cannot bear to send them away as they would think it hard, would not understand it.

It is now quite dark and my ideas have certainly gone to roost for I feel like I wanted to write but cannot think of what I want to say. Are you still busy? I do hope you have had or will have some rest. I hope I will get a letter from some of you the next time I hear from Yuma. Tell me all that goes on in the neighborhood and give my love to all inquiring friends. I hope that this may find you all very well and that you continue to have the best of health. Then I will not mind being so far from you so much. I do not know how this is written. Cannot write by candlelight on account of having to shut myself up out of all drafts and it is so warm I cannot think and I cannot see a letter, so will close. Give much love to Pap, L., H., and S., and your wonderful self. Tell Floy to write very soon a tremendous letter, not to imitate this writing as I could not read it if she did... I remain your affectionate daughter,

Ellie

My dear sister:

I was made extremely happy the fourth of this month by the arrival of Mr. R. and your and ma's letters and also one from Floy, written in Baltimore. Mr. R. was very tired when he came in and wet from head to feet. He arrived at Fort Yuma on Saturday evening and started from there on Tuesday morning by barge and having no boat to bring her, dropped down with the current and after staying on her something over two days, he then took a small boat with several to row and came

that way. Was out one night and on account of the high tide, the ground was wet for miles so they had not a dry spot to lie down upon but propped themselves against a large stump of a tree and slept about an hour. He took an early start and got within some miles of here and the tide being high and the current strong, left the boat and walked across as by that means he would reach home some hours earlier. I was lying upon the lounge in an unsettled state, trying to read and just raised up and looked out the door when I saw a man with something in his hand, running across the upper deck of one of the steamers. When I watch to see what it was and in a moment he had unfolded a flag and run it up on its pole. I at once suspected the cause and went to the door and the other two steamers and the barges were running up their flags, I thought they saw the steamer Cocopah as she was expected down in a week or so and that he was on board and that they were answering her flag, announcing his presence on board. But *I* could see nothing of her and went and sat down to try and keep from getting excited when in a minute the cook came running down—and said there were two men coming across the flat and one they felt *sure* was Captain R. but wanted to be sure. Well I watched and waited but could not see him. The slough was full of boats and barges and so many men and I did not know where to look for him to *cross it* and I began to think they had all been mistaken so went and sat down to wait for his step before I would look again and pretty soon I heard it. Oh! But I was too glad, but was much disappointed to find he was not well. He is much better but still suffers from pain and is very weak. The last doctor told him his left lung was affected. Gave him some medicine which seemed to help him but an old man, an old acquaintance, told him he could cure him, that he had been affected in the same way only much worse. The medicine is made of herbs. He has now been taking it for five days and *I* think it is beginning to have some affect. If it cures him I will send the receipt as I believe it will cure Callie. *I do hope* it may cure him. He has suffered so long, ten months, but he is as patient as ever, never complains. Tell Ma she must *not* think much about it, that is to worry, for it will do no good and I do not fret at all, only it hurts me sometimes to know he is in pain but I still think he will get well. All the doctors agree there is nothing dangerous but for all that I think they are a set of rare humbugs. A San Francisco doctor, one old fellow, the first he went to, has a great reputation. Well, he doctored him two months, blistered<sup>1</sup> and blistered him and did him no good and his advice to him was to keep on blistering. Guess he must have thought Mr. R. had lived long enough.

<sup>1</sup>Blistering consisted of applying caustic agents, such as a mustard plaster, to create blisters on the skin. The blisters were then drained, under the assumption that the blisters would draw out the toxins and infection.

Monday morning; when I got this far had to put supper on the table and it was then too late to resume. The steamship just arrived and Mr. R. has gone down to it in the Fort Yuma steamer and I will have to hurry up my letter. Intended to have them all written in time but very unexpectedly had company, when the last steamer came down (this day week). The Captain brought his wife down and Captain Polhemus, wife and children and a doctor and a lady, the wife of an officer who is returning to California as her husband is ordered in the field. She has no place to live. She is a very agreeable lady, spent several evenings with me. It is lonely and tiresome for her on the boat, both the Captains' wives being Mexican, one of them talks very good English but Captain P's wife cannot speak a word, or does not. Oh, how the time does fly but I am not sorry although I have nothing to complain of, for very unexpectedly this has been a pleasant summer, *so much cooler* than I expected. Have a most delightful breeze everyday and keep our house all open at night which is elegant but the best of all is we do not expect to be here more than 8 or 9 months longer. We are then going to Oregon to live, the southern part, Coos County, about 400 miles from San Francisco. Tis' said to be a splendid country. The land is cheap and *very* rich. It is like California. We will raise everything but has the advantage over that state in that it does not suffer from drought. Mr. R. said it is a land flowing with milk and honey, a great deal of timber, a great deal of wild honey. He has not yet bought a place but we will go and then will look around and find one to please him. I am perfectly delighted with the idea... I must tell of the present Mr. R. brought me. A nice pin and cuff buttons of gold quartz; chose that kind as it is more of a curiosity than other stones. They are very pretty and attract attention even in this land of gold quartz. Also brought me the loveliest gold watch and chain that I ever saw. It is just perfect and what I like so much, the chain is like a cord and goes around the neck, one end attached to the watch the other hangs down about half way with a gold tassel on the end, a gold slide on the chain and in the center of it is a lovely pearl. He displayed a great deal of taste in the selection, as he did when he got my rings... My little canary bird has been singing lovely since Mr. R. came home. He appreciates good company. Looked at me so knowingly out of his little bead black eyes and my mocking bird is getting so tame and commencing to sing and will take flies and canned cherries out of my hand, but I lost my little cat. The coyotes took him. How nice that you are making so much butter. We cannot have any here this season of the year, just when we want it most. The best thing we have here is fish which we get fresh every day or two. But I must close. I feel real tired. So, write me often as you can. Mr. R. send love to you all. With much love to each of you, I remain your loving sister,

Ellie

And, now to the culminating event in Ellen's stand and adventurous life on the Colorado River.

Arizona City, September 29, 1871

My own dear Mother:

I will surprise you when I tell you you are a grandmother and Pap a grandfather. Your granddaughter was born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of this month, on the Steamer Mohave, two days from this place.

My good true friend, Mrs. McDougall and I started on the 17<sup>th</sup>. I expected to be here five or six weeks before the event but had been suffering with a bilious diarrhea for nearly two weeks and on the boat it got worse and caused my baby to be born 10 to 15 days sooner than it should have been. And so you see, I made a mistake of several weeks. Well, no wonder. I do not know how anyone knows. I did not mind the birth of the baby at all. She is a very strong child. She was born at half pass two o'clock in the morning and the Captain of the boat sent some men in a ship to A. City for the doctor in case everything was not right. It was Wednesday night when the men reached there. The doctor started at once, rowing all night and reached the steamer at 4 o'clock Thursday morning and found me well but the baby sadly in need of medicine, as I had not a drop of milk for her and it needed a purge at once. He told me afterwards that he was much frightened for several hours and it has been perfectly well since. It is the best child that ever was. Hope will continue. So I have to drink porter for milk for it which is an awful dose but expect to get accustomed to that.

Mr. R. did not come up with me. It was impossible for him to do so unless it became positively necessary and we both thought it was not. He is quite well now, or at least I left him so. Will hear from him in several days and maybe see him.

Captain Thorn dispatched a messenger to him at once, letting him know that he was a father and that we were well. He will be so glad. Tell Sister Han and Floy they may now feel independent as regards a niece, having one that is really their own. I thought it was going to be a boy for I wished it to be on Mr. R.'s account although he never expressed such a wish, just so we had a baby, he would be satisfied. But I wanted it to be so that it could follow him about. We arrived here the 22<sup>nd</sup>, about sundown, when Captain Polhamus and wife came on board at once to see me but I was not moved until early the next morning when I washed, put on a calico wrapper over my nightdress and was carried to Captain Polhamus' (house) in an armchair where there was a nice room prepared for me. Mrs. P. had had it ready for some time, expecting me up. Mr. R. having made arrangements with him some time since. Mrs. P. is a Mexican lady, one of the finest of her race

and a perfect lady in every respect. Every attention is paid to me that is possible. Providence seems to have taken special charge of me although I am the last to wish it but then I have such a good mother. The doctor who attends to me is a Spaniard, not a Mexican. He is a very fine man, watches me very closely, comes in twice a day. I am now nearly well of the diarrhea. Gaining strength very fast. Tell Floy I received her nice long letter the evening I arrived here and after receiving quite a cabinful of company, I am sitting up in bed and writing a note to Mr. R., I got Mrs. Mac to put a candle on a chair and I laid myself down to the enjoyment of it and after finishing it went off to the land of Nod... Write often, I shall feel nervous. The typhoid fever is so close. Watch yourselves closely and when any of you feel badly have the advice of a physician at once.

September 28<sup>th</sup>; I received such a very kind affectionate note from Mr. R. last night. Said he was rejoiced to hear of the birth of his daughter. No one ever had a better husband. I sent him a piece of her hair. He thinks its beautiful. I want to know just how Floy looks and acts when she hears of her niece. Tell her to write to me with a photograph of herself and as for Sister Han, she will take it as everything else, perfectly cool. I could tell you some queer things, could I see you. We had very warm weather for several weeks before I left Port Isabel and it has been very warm here since we have been here. I never take a nap in the daytime nor sleep well at night but it is cooler today. Hope it will continue... Tell Mollie H. to forgive me for treating her so badly but not feeling well for some time have indulged my laziness... Tell Pap his granddaughter sends him a kiss and a nice sweet one, for even now she is a pretty little thing, brown hair and large blue eyes and Baby, with myself, wish to be affectionately remembered to her... I have written just as thing came into my head, could not arrange sentences or subjects well. I feel grateful to Pap for wishing he could send me a barrel of beets. I could devour them with a will. Expect the steamship will bring some this fall, if we live. Next spring we will be where can get everything good... Must close, am tired and the flies are horrid but a great deal of love to you all, I am your affectionate daughter,

Ellie

Written on the bottom of the last page: You will have to supply missing words, cannot read it over, will tell you some time about baby's clothes, would like to have some patterns sometime.



Arizona City, October 2, 1971

My dear Mother:

I wrote to you last week, know that you will be anxious how we are getting along. I am right well and have nothing to do but gather strength and flesh, both of which I could do much faster if I could only sleep but various things keep me from sleeping very well at night. It is impossible to take a nap in the daytime. The heat, flies and children entirely prohibit such a thing, although no better children, yet they must amuse themselves.

I am very anxious to get back to Port Isabel with my husband and peace and quietness. The baby is well, sleeps all the time, not one bit of trouble. Is gaining daily and getting flesh. It was very thin when born but very strong. I am thinner than you ever saw me, having the diarrhea so long and not being able to eat much for several months.

October 4: When I got this far I laid down my pencil to rest and could not resume it until yesterday for the baby was quite poorly all the forenoon and could not lay it down until about dinnertime and I was quite worn out. Think the milk I gave her made her sick. Have not enough for her. Think I would have if I were not cooped up here like a prisoner. If we live, I expect in a year's time to have a home of my own. I will surely know how to appreciate it. I have seemed only to exist but with an acute consciousness of existence this last year of my life, but Mr. R. does not imagine my feelings nor shall he. Yet it all seems to be coming out right. He is quite well now for which I cannot be too grateful and thankful. He suffered so much and was so patient that I feel I should not utter one complaint... The baby is two weeks old today and I have just had her up. I do wish you could see her. She has funny little ways already. She has as strong a grip as a child of two years, clasps my finger like a little vise. While on this subject must tell you how the news went through the yards (port Isabel) to her father. The other day the Captain of one of the barges, a young fellow, came in to see me and told me it with great glee, but to go back a little a few hours after it was born at early daylight. When the Captain of the Mohave (it is pronounced Moharvey), the boat I was in, was getting steam up preparatory for starting, Captain Overman with his boat came alongside (had been tied up for the night a few miles ahead of us). He came in to see me and the baby and I told him to tell Captain R. that the baby and I were well and when he came to the mouth of the river (which is nearly two days after passing it) the brig was still laying there that we left and Captain O. stopped, went on board and told Captain Dougherty who immediately ran up all her flags. Captain Overman doing the same. Mr. R. was sitting on the office porch, reading and

seeing the flags flying at once got his skiff and a man to take him a distance of two and one-half miles and soon heard the whole thing. The one who told me is a very fine fellow and he says he went to Mr. R. to know the meaning of the flags and he had to tell him and he declares Mr. R. was the happiest looking man he ever saw. While Mr. R. was in San Francisco I employed and amused myself in making baby clothes... I made myself 3 wrappers and read a good deal and ran into Mrs. Mac's often and amused myself with the Indians.

I kept my secret from you fearing you would worry about me and lay awake at night thinking until you would make yourselves sick. I thought if anything happened to me it would not be as hard on you in the end as if you had worried beforehand... This is another warm day but with the rushing of a cool breeze occasionally. I am covered (except on my face) with the prickly heat, never saw such a thing before. Hope never again. It looks and itches horribly. Please excuse all this miserable writing, I lie down to rest and hold the paper on a little board so cannot write steady.

Tea, cold bread and butter, weak tea, some cheese cut very thin; for dinner two kinds of vegetables, never more, pickles, napkins, bread, or a little dessert. I find you are entirely too particular about the table.

The next letter of Mrs. Robinson's that has survived was dated nearly two months later at Port Isabel. Weakened by her illness, her existence at Port Isabel is fast becoming intolerable except when Captain Robinson is by her side. She dreads his trips to the gulf some five miles down the slough for, when their ocean steamships arrive at the mouth of the shipyard slough, Captain Robinson was responsible for the safe transference of passengers and freight to the river boats and barges usually waiting for them within the slough where they are well protected from heavy seas and tumultuous tides. By provision of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 Mexico gave the United States the right of passage for vessels with their passengers and freight up the Gulf of California and the Colorado River. The ocean-going vessels anchors at the mouth of the Port Isabel Slough, therefore, to avoid the high Mexican customs duties were they to nose into the Mexican shore for land transfer of their cargos.

Port Isabel, Dec. 15<sup>th</sup>

My very dear Mother:

I received your ever welcome letter the 11<sup>th</sup> of this month and I have been trying ever since to muster up energy enough to reply to it, but could not before

tonight and now Bridget is holding baby whilst I write but from the sounds proceeding from the other side of this room I will soon have to throw down my pen and take... I am kept so closely in the house attending to baby that I do not get a mouthful of fresh air consequently do not have any energy at all. Hope it will be a little better... Maggie (for the baby was named Margaret) is beginning to take so much notice; is such a funny little thing, can sit up as straight as I can, believe she could without any support but I do not trust her, and so handy with her hands, sometimes when taking a good look at her Papa she puts on a most dignified expression and claps one hand over the other. The night your letters came, her father was sitting at one end of the little table, B at the other end on the lounge playing with baby, I sitting in front reading yours when B picked up a piece of brown paper and told Maggie she should have a letter too and presently called my attention to her. She was sitting up straight as an arrow smoothing the paper on her fingers with her big round blue eyes fixed on her father. Oh! She made such a beautiful picture... She has a most beautiful head and her hair... is a light rich red brown... Mr. R. feels pretty well, he has to be down at the ship all the time while she is in. Does not get home every night. It is a cross to me. I am always afraid he will take cold this place feels just like a prison when he is absent—truth is I do not like to have him out of sight for long at a time—for with all my blessings, and they are without number, I seem to lose sight of them when he is from home. Will close—the baby is asleep and I am so sleepy... Will not receive letters many more times from Port Isabel. Time is flying here—not much more than three months to stay—am so glad.

No Signature.

In the following letter of December 19 Ellen faces her second Christmas at Port Isabel free of the discouragement and homesickness of the year before. Happy with her baby she looked forward to her departure from Port Isabel to a new land on the Pacific Coast, both green and temperate. Presumably the wild goose being prepared under forced feeding was for their Christmas dinner.

While wild ducks and geese in vast numbers frequented the surrounding mudflats during the Summer and Fall the absence of trees and shrubs to screen a hunter's approach made it possible to shoot them only when, in flight to and from their feeding grounds, they ventured within gunshot.



Colorado River Steamer Mojave No. 1, with Barge No. 1 in background. Note Indian at capstan. In stateroom of the Mohave, Margaret, daughter of Ellen Robinson was born September 20, 1872 while steamer enroute to Arizona City. View of Port Isabel at high tide when illimitable mudflats were covered with water. (Courtesy of Arizona Pioneer's Society)

Tuesday night, Dec. 19<sup>th</sup> (Port Isabel)

My dear Mother:

Have not got my letter started yet but expect to soon. Mr. R. took a very bad cold last night which distresses me but he is something better now... Well, Christmas is almost here again. Will you all be at home that day?... Bridget says to tell you we have a wild goose for Christmas. She is feeding it faithfully. It eats so heartily twill certainly be very fat. We had one about ten days ago but it was tough. Have had some splendid clams lately...

Captain McDonough's wife has a son six days older than my baby. He expected to bring her down this time but had several hundred troops aboard and could not—will bring her next time if no troops. We weighed our baby when she was a month old, weighed 8 lbs.—at two months ten and three-quarters. Tomorrow she is three months. Will weigh her if Mr. R. has time and the day is fine enough to take her out... He weighed me, weight 107—nineteen pounds

lighter than last winter... think I am gaining. Must now close am very sleepy... With much love to yourself, Pap and the girls and all friends, I remain your affectionate daughter,

Ellie

In this letter Ellen make her first and only mention of earthquakes. Temblors along the Colorado River from Fort Yuma to its mouth were by no means unknown. In the past some had been of great violence producing much disturbance both to river bed and to vessels playing upon its waters. It is possible that the upheavals of far-distant minor force are not officially recorded unless frequently repeated.

[Letter written from Port Isabel "Tuesday night" (Spring of 1872)]

We had a shock of an earthquake last night or rather this morning about 3 o'clock—it was sufficient to break the schooner from her moorings. The schooner lies about a mile and a half from here down the slough. It awakened me but I did not know what wakened me so suddenly from the creaking of the house thought that someone was in it—listened but it died away. Did not awaken Mr. R. and baby was lying on my arm so did not get up to look—thought it was only an Indian if it was anyone. This piece of blue is Maggie's Christmas present from Mrs. Mac, will make her a nice suit when she walks. No more, in haste. E.

[Ellen continues] I wish you could see Maggie with a big piece of bread in her hand doing her best to eat it. Mr. R. said the other night he wished you could have her home there awhile. She is getting so sweet and cunning. Give my love to all enquiring friends. Did Ma ever get the kitchen fixed? The "Newbern" is on her way down—the trip after this we expect to go on her. It may be sooner than the middle of May and it may not. I hope it will I am *so* tired. Burn this letter as soon as you all read it, although it is not worth the reading... I would write to V. if I had the time... but it seems I have not a minute for when Bridget has Maggie I am interrupted every minute by them. *Must* close. With much love to Ma and Pap and your own dear self and whole heap for sister Han from Mr. R., baby & self—I wish you could see Maggie.

Ellie

Port Isabel, April 12, 1872

My dear Mother:

I will make another attempt to write to you although I have nothing worth the writing... The "Newbern" came in on Sunday morning early, the last day of March, and is still here. Some detention in the boats up the river. I do not know what it is. May be waiting for troops, was some such talk. I am so anxious for her to sail that she may the sooner get back, I fear that we will not get off before the first of June. Bridget leaves me this trip. She has been complaining all this spring and fears to stay longer, dreads the trip up in warm weather, says it is so hot, it only takes ten days to go, sometimes not that and it is hot only the first four or five days but she is tired, has been away from her church for nearly a year and from civilization. My pearl is asleep. Oh! She is such a happy little thing and so sweet, has such cunning ways, I do hope she may be spared to me and continue to have good health, her Papa is *very* fond of her and she of him. As soon as she awakes in the morning she turns to him and *scratches* his back and if he is sound asleep she will holler which awakes him and he turns around and they play awhile. Some times I go to sleep. They play until one or both gets tired when he gets up and she turns to me and takes another nap. Mr. R.'s health is very much improved. He is trouble sometimes with some phlegm in his throat. He grows dear and sweeter every day—he went down to the ship this afternoon. I hear the oars now, I know he is coming. The moment he tells me he is going to the ship everything looks dark and I get so homesick, for this is such a prison-like place. I'll not be such a baby when I get to a better place—I do hope you are all well. Do take every care of yourselves—the climate is so cold but 'tis getting warmer now (in Maryland). The grass is getting green and the flowers are coming up—I can see my home just how it looks... I hope the small-pox has entirely disappeared. Tell brothers I'll write to them as soon as possible—after shaking this Mexican soil off my feet, for then I calculate on a slight expansion of ideas but I am afraid I will always feel cramped. Mr. R. has just come in and retired. He remarked to me the other day that he had formed one good habit on the river, that of retiring very early.

Give much love to Pap, the girls and a great deal for your own dear self and brothers, and all inquiring friends.

Ellie

And so, life at Port Isabel daily became more trying for Ellen. She was kept within the confines of her tiny home by the almost constant attention of her baby. There was no doctor to consult about its care. Captain Robinson, in addition to being much older, was occupied with his many responsibilities at the shipyard. The occasional distraction of picturing the loveliness of her former home in Maryland was soon dispelled

by the start reality of the sand and mud and water that completely surrounded them.

[Then the postscript to the letter above] I have every blessing but that of a home near you, within a day or two's journey, but I am not repining, it would seem too wicked. I would love to live in one of the western states, only because it would bring me nearer you, the climate is too cold for Mr. R. He could not stand it—I think if we did I would get out of the reach of the dear relatives. It is a very great relief to be out of their meddlesome reach although I have great love for the truthful and peacemaking pretense of my relatives, but everyone seems with a few exceptions ashamed to tell the truth. Mrs. Mac is one of the truthful ones—is is very particular and one cannot be too particular about the truth. Mrs. Mac's health is not very good. She has been here too long—she expects to take a trip to San Francisco when we go. I hope she will. It will do her so much good. I'll draw this to a close—I do hate to write with a lead pencil but have to. It worries me to use a pen. I wish there was a letter coming for me but suppose there is not unless Han wrote.

Your loving daughter.

'E.'

It seems more than likely that, morbidly sensitive over lonely, out-of-the-world situation, Ellen came to believe that her life since her marriage to Captain Robinson, so many years her senior, was the subject of critical gossip by relatives and friends. With the completion of this postscript, however, Ellen soon left Port Isabel, presumably in the "Mintern," for San Francisco. She was never to return.

The next letter extant was written two months later. Though return of strength is retarded by the care and nursing of the baby, Ellen seems to be looking forward happily to the future.

San Francisco, June 13, 1872

My dear Mother:

I arrived at this city on Friday evening, the 7<sup>th</sup>, came out to Captain Pierson's which is in the suburbs on Saturday morning. Mr. R. did not come with me. Mr. Hartshorne wrote to him wishing him to stay several months longer to put up a boat and barge but I think I told you he could not get to come up with me being so

busy. I could have stayed with him, only for the baby and account I feared she could not endure the heat, and I felt nearly played out. Captain P. insisted on Mr. R. and I coming to his home. Captain P. is not at home, his wife has a surprise for him, a young son. He was five days old when I came. She is sitting up this morning. She is a very pleasant and agreeable young woman. Her mother is with her. She is one of the finest old ladies I ever saw. Everyone I meet is so kind to me. The people of California seem *all* to have at least one good trait of character, they are so unselfish. I was not at all seasick coming up, was so glad for baby was as much as I could attend too. Mrs. MacDougal came up on a visit. She has a sister-in-law here. Her health has gotten bad being in that warm place so long. She was seasick whenever it was a little rough... I hope you will write as soon as you get this. Do not be surprised if you see me coming home this summer. I will if it is possible, for I do not wish to stay here and had better be home than boarding in the city and not feeling comfortable in the least. Mr. R. told me to come if I could and he would come for me as soon as he leaves the river. I brought a little Cocopah Indian with me. I will leave her here if I come home. I call her "Dolly Varden." I am entirely out of clothes after being down there and getting nothing, but intend to see if I can get home before I attempt to get anything. Have to pay so much for everything here and besides I cannot get out. Cannot leave baby and cannot take her. She is so heavy for me. Mrs. P's sister came and went out with me on Monday a little ways and I was tired to death. Only got three or four little articles. I did not intend to come home until I could come right but I guess I'll have to. I have no time to write now. Write as soon as you get this. Will give you the address. Love to self, Pap, the girls, and any inquiring friends.

Your daughter,

'Ellie'

Address care of Captain W.H. Pierson, Cor. Bryant and 24<sup>th</sup> Street, San Francisco

On boarding the steamship for San Francisco Ellen probably had changed from the plain calico dresses, most suitable for the climatic conditions at the shipyard, to those of her trousseau in which she had journeyed west two years before. In style-conscious San Francisco she keenly felt her out-moded attire. With commendable thriftiness, however, she decided to postpone the purchase of new clothes until she could engage the skilled services of her mother.



That decision had scarcely been reached before a letter arrived from Captain Robinson. He had assumed from Ellen's letter of the 13<sup>th</sup> that her departure for Maryland was imminent. He wrote:

Port Isabel. June 25, 1872

Dear Wife:

I received your very welcome letter on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. I would have answered before this but there was no way of sending before now; but will commence and have it ready for first opportunity.

I was much delighted to hear of your safe arrival, and that you got along on the ship so well. I do want to see baby and you, too, very much. I have been like a lost sheep ever since you left but I will be a very busy man which will make the time pass quicker. I am getting better and hope by the time the new boat is done to be entirely well. Should this reach you before you leave for the east; be very particular not to show any more money when you pay for anything than you can help. Always have small sums ready and give the porters on the cars two or three dollars and they will help you along the road and any time you should want any information about baggage or if you want to telegraph, call on the conductor of the train, not the conductor of the sleeping car.

You better telegraph to Robert when you are going to leave San Francisco and what route to take. The route we came is best, Central Pacific, Union Pacific, Rock Island, Chicago, Lackawanna and Pittsburg, Northern Central and Baltimore. Should you need any money before you see me, let me know and where to send it.

You will find enclosed letter from Philadelphia which arrived here same day your letter arrived. Take good care of yourself and Maggie. With many sweet kisses. I will join you as soon as I possibly can. Remember me to Mrs. Pierson and family and my love to the folks at home.

[And then, in response to a surge of loneliness, he continues:]

Dear Nellie:

I hope this is the last time we will be separated for I am not at all content or happy without you. Our prospects are fine now and with a little energy and forethought we can glide along through life with comfort and happiness.

I will now close hoping to see your sweet face and imprinting thereon many sweet kisses at the earliest opportunity. I still remain your affectionate husband, 'D.C. Robinson.' Please write whenever you can. 'D.C.R.' Goodbye.

That Ellen reached her childhood home with Maggie that summer is established by the following letter received by her from Captain Robinson with cover addressed to: "Dublin, Harford Co., Maryland." From its context one appreciates her profound disappointment that he would not join her in Maryland for the winter. She must, at length, have realized that there was ample justification for his decision. He was bound by his promise to the steamship company to remain at Port Isabel until the completion of the great new steamer "Gila" and "number 4 " barge. A task that would not be finished until the following spring. More important to them both, he was determined to have a home provided away from Port Isabel for Ellen's return to the west when his work on the river was done. Nor was the matter of his health to be neglected.

Port Isabel, Oct. 5<sup>th</sup>, 1872

Dear and Beloved Wife:

I received your very welcome letter of August 7<sup>th</sup> day before yesterday and it made me so happy to know that you and baby are so well and contented. It will be the object of my life to make you and baby happy and contented for all time. We are separated now but the time will soon roll around when we never part again for so long a time.

You must not be discouraged because I talk about remaining away from you all winter. My object in doing so is to save my health and find a home for ourselves and Maggie.

Give my love to Pap and Mom and the girls also Susan and others.

Your affectionate husband 'D.C. Robinson'.

The tranquility and happiness that Ellen and her Captain had tried so diligently to obtain still evaded them. In 1873 Captain Robinson, after launching of the "Gila" left Port Isabel, for the time being at least. Some months later, it seems, he became interested in operating pleasure boats for the summer trade on Clear Lake with headquarters at Lakeport in Lake County. For the next definite record we have of them is from a letter written by Captain Robinson from Lakeport to Ellen than living with Margaret in a rented house at Santa Rosa, Sonoma County, California.

Lakeport, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1874

Dear Nellie,

I received your letter of the 17<sup>th</sup>. Was glad to hear from you so soon. The valise arrived safe. I had written to you from Calistoga on the 16<sup>th</sup>. When I arrived in S.F. I found that Luke had left for Lakeport with all of the machinery; and I took the afternoon boat for Calistoga and overhauled him at that place, with two carpenters and everything right. I arrived here on Tuesday night and commenced work on the boat Wednesday morning. So everything is going smoothly... I have improved in health considerably in the last two days. I got a good supply of medicine from the doctor when in S. Francisco. I met Mr. Norton on the street just from the river and he told me that all hands discharged at the shipyard but C. Overman and (they) were coming up on the ship (probably looking for work). I hope they will not call on me to go to the river before October; by that time I will be able to see what I can do here. It looks very flattering here now. The travel has just commenced and this little boat here is making from \$40 to \$70 per day and if I were ready I could make \$100 per day easy. Part of the machinery will be here tomorrow and we will hurry up all we can.

If Mr. Cooper is willing to wait several months for his rent, let him wait. I want all the money I can get to finish the boat. I expect to come over home about the first of August. Many kisses to you and Peggie (Margaret).

Your loving Husband.

D.C. Robinson

The optimism and elation obvious in this letter to Ellen continue in the one to follow. Yet the final play in their fateful game with fortune was just at hand.

Lakeport, June 28<sup>th</sup> 1874

Dear Nellie:

I received your very welcome letter of the 26<sup>th</sup>. I was happy to hear that you and Maggie were well. If anything happens serious let me know at once. Don't get discouraged; everything looks encouraging here. Our boat is in frame and we are getting along very well. The ladies and gentlemen come down to look at our boat every evening. I wish you were here to come down in the yard at the edge of the

lake every evening, then I should be happier than I have been for a long time. My health has improved very much in the last week.

I hope you will be successful with your school girls. If you could get enough of them I think it would suit you better than dress-making. I am sorry now we did not move here at once, for this is a much better place for your business and pleasanter than Santa Rosa. Many kisses to you and Maggie.

Your loving husband

D.C. Robinson

P.S. If everything goes well I will come over in two weeks. D.C.R.

On the cover of this letter Ellen wrote "The last letter written to me by my beloved husband."



CAPTAIN DAVID C. ROBINSON, 1830-1874. Ships Carpenter-General Manager Port Isabel in charge of construction. Captain and Pilot Colorado River Steamers.

During the night of July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1874 Captain Robinson suffered a fatal heart attack<sup>1</sup>. Thus died one of the great Colorado River captains. He was the second pilot to guide, on a independent voyage, a river steamer up the uncharted river 350 miles north of Arizona City (Fort Yuma) to El Dorado Canyon. With the forgoing letters is presented for the first time the important role Captain Robinson played in the construction of the great river steamers at Port Isabel. He was mourned by all who had known him. His accomplishments on the river are of record.

Ellen endured her tragic loss with the fortitude that had characterized her deportment throughout the period encompassed by these letters. Ezra Curtis, David Robinson's partner in their Clear Lake enterprise, managed Ellen's interests with his own following the death of the captain. As the dreary months passed she became more dependent upon him and some two years later she became his wife. They moved to his ranch at Freestone some ten miles west of Santa Rosa. The next few months were happy ones for Ellen and for Margaret who loved her step-father. Then tragedy struck again. In 1876 Ellen's mother, Mrs. Hayes, who had been failing for many months passed away in her Maryland home. Before the grieving ceased for her mother's loss, Ezra Curtis became ill and, despite a change of climate in Texas near her brother Toby's home, soon died.

Saddened and discouraged by these repeated blows of misfortune, Ellen resumed<sup>2</sup> the name of her first husband and, at length returned to her native state, settling down at Castleton, Maryland, where she remained until her death in 1913.

Margaret Robinson<sup>3</sup> never married. Now nearing her 86<sup>th</sup> year and in good health, she is living in California. She inherited the intelligence, kindness and person warmth of her remarkable parents. Despite her advanced age she continues well informed in both local and national affairs. Born prematurely September 20, 1872 on the steamer "Mohave," as it struggled all too slowly up the turbulent Colorado River, Miss Robinson is one of the few to survive the era when the Colorado (River) constituted the only dependable source of supply between the Pacific Coast and the rapidly growing, unruly inland communities of the Arizona Territory.

[NOTE: The editor of these letters wishes to express his deep appreciation to Miss Eleanor Sloan, Mrs. Helen Overpeck and Mrs. Sadie Schmidt of The Arizona Pioneer Historical Society for their great assistance in making available the material concerning the early Colorado River days from which the notations for these letters were obtained.

My special thanks, also, to Mr. Mulford Winsor, Director of the Department of the Arizona State Library and Archives and Mrs. Alice B. Good for their cooperation and kindly interest in my behalf during this inquiry. The editor is particularly indebted to Mr. Otis Marston, authority on the history of the Colorado River, for guiding him to the possessor of these letters. F.S.D.

### **The Los Angeles Corral Pages 271-285**

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1 Richard Lingenfelter *Steamboatson the Colorado River 1852-1916* states that Captain Robinson died from a lung hemorrhage.

2 **Notes from Ancestry:** Ellen Hayes Robinson Curtis retained the surname of Curtis for the rest of her life. She bore Ezra Curtis two children, George born in California on 4-19-1877 and a daughter Mabel J. born in California around 1880. In June of 1880 Ellen is listed on the census as a widow and living with her father and some adult sibling in Maryland.

3 Her daughter Margaret (Maggie) was named after Ellen's beloved mother Margaret Hayes.