

THE OATMAN MASSACRE

A wagon train led by John Brewster, a Mormon who rejected the leadership of the church in Utah, along with approximately 90 followers, known as Brewsterites, left Independence Missouri on August 5, 1850 in search of the “intended place of gathering” for the Mormons in California. Royce and Mary Ann Oatman and their seven children were amongst the followers.

After some conflict in the group the Oatman’s and several other families opted to take the southern route through Socorro and Tucson. Finding the terrain less hospitable than they imagined and once they reached Maricopa Wells learning that the trail ahead was rough, and the Indians were unfriendly, the other families chose to stay there. Royce Oatman was determined to continue, with the hope of finding a better place for his family’s future.

On February 18, 1851, after traveling on their own for four days, they were visited by a group of possibly Yavapai, who asked the Oatman’s to share their food, guns and tobacco. Royce shared some tobacco but refused to provide them with some of their food explaining they had none to spare. After some vocal harassment from the Yavapai he gave them some bread, which seemed to satisfy the Indians. The family began to reload their wagons and prepare to leave, when suddenly the Yavapai, with loud cries, began attacking the family with clubs.



Royce, Mary and four of their children were killed. Olive, 13, and her sister Mary Ann, 7, was taken captive. Lorenzo, 14, was thrown into a ravine after being clubbed on the head and beaten. When he regained consciousness, he managed to make his way to a settlement where he was treated for his wounds. Three days later, with the help of some men, he found and buried his slain family members.

The Yavapai forced Olive and Mary Ann to walk, without shoes, to a village near current day Congress, Arizona, where they were enslaved, beaten and mistreated. They were held there for about a year, when a group of Mojave Indians traded two horses, a few vegetables, some beads and three blankets for them. They were forced again to walk, this time to the Mojave village, located near present day Needles, California.

Aespaneo, the wife of tribal leader Espianola, and his daughter Topeka gave the girls plots of land they could farm, and Olive would later speak fondly of the two women. The Mojave, following tribal custom, tattooed the chins of the girls using the color from the blue cactus. The Mojave believed the tattoo would ensure a good afterlife.

Drought came to the area in 1855, bringing a shortage of food, starvation and death to the tribe. Mary Ann, age 11, did not survive. Olive was able to convince the Mojave to bury her instead of following their custom of cremation.

During the years of her captivity there had been visitors to the village, including the 1854 Whipple expedition that included some two hundred members who spent time trading with the Mojave, yet Olive’s presence had remained unknown. In the winter of 1855-1856 the army received information that a white woman was living amongst the Mojave. A Yuma Indian, named Francisco, was sent by Lt. Colonel Burke, post commander of Fort Yuma, to deliver a message to the Mojave that they had heard of a white girl living with them and asked for her return, or to be told the reason she chose to remain. The Mojave initially denied Olive was white. After a second attempt to secure her release, Francisco advised that Burke would be informed of their refusal and the soldiers would come to the village to get her. Olive was involved in the negotiations and according to some accounts she took this opportunity to confirm she was indeed white and that the Mojave were attempting to deceive Francisco. Wanting to avoid confrontation with the military on February 28, 1856, in exchange for a ransom consisting of a horse and some blankets, the Mojave released Olive.

Traveling for twenty days, accompanied by Topeka, Olive reached Fort Yuma. Olive, who was still wearing the traditional Mojave bark skirt, insisted that she be provided proper clothing before she would enter the fort. Upon entry, she was greeted by cheering crowds.

Olive was informed of Lorenzo’s survival and that he had never given up looking for her. They were reunited at Fort Yuma and traveled together to Jackson County, Oregon to live with a cousin.

In 1857 Olive’s story, *Life Among the Indians: Captivity of the Oatman Girls*, written by Reverend Royal Stratton, was published and became a best seller. The Oatman’s traveled with Stratton to New York, where Olive went on a lecture tour to promote the book. It is believed by many that Stratton embellished the story and consequently many questions concerning her captivity remain.

In 1865 Olive married John Fairchild, and they adopted a daughter named Mamie. Olive lived out her final days in Sherman, Texas. She died on March 20, 1903, at the age of 65.