# Palomar Pioneers: Of Travail and Tragedy

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**Rattler Man**

Joseph Beresford, son of a British Lord, fell in love with the gardener's daughter. His father, whose lineage went back to James I, gave him an ultimatum: marry beneath your rank and lose your inheritance. Joseph chose love. His father not only disowned him, he gave Joseph a small sum of money and banished him from England forever.

As they sailed to America in the late 1860s, Joseph assured his bride he'd strike gold in California. They would return in such high style that all the Beresfords — including a nephew who became Lord Mayor of London — would embrace them.

By the time they reached Yuma, the Beresfords had two daughters. As they watched rope-pulled ferries cross the muddy Colorado, Joseph heard tales of lost treasure.

Thomas L. "Peg Leg" Smith, a mountain man who died in 1866, allegedly discovered "fabulous wealth" near three small buttes, three days west of the river. Most prospectors assumed that meant around Borrego Springs. But a self-proclaimed insider said no: the buttes, and nuggets the size of oranges, lay near a great mountain northwest of the desert.

The family had become so accustomed to hardship, they eagerly traversed the arid wasteland in 110-degree heat. To avoid human contact, they skirted the Southern Emigrant Trail Camp at Warner's Ranch, and continued beyond Hot Springs Mountain, the highest peak in San Diego County. They ascended into Lost Valley. A few days later, they headed west, toward Palomar.

One cold evening, somewhere on the eastern slope, Joseph found an abandoned adobe structure near a flowing spring. Except for a fireplace and a tall pile of straw, the single room was empty. While he started a fire, his wife and daughters made straw beds on the dirt floor — and soon fell asleep.

Joseph went out to care for the horses and rustle up firewood. He heard shouts, then sky-piercing shrieks. He raced back inside. Rattlesnakes, which had crawled into the straw for warmth, shook staccato clacks and struck and struck the women like punching fists.

Joseph grabbed a large stick and slashed with swift and terrible fury. But every time he killed one, another twitching tongue emerged from the straw. He pounded their hard, triangular heads, or speared and flung them at the walls.

Joseph was enough of a pioneer to know that, to make sure you don't step near a sharp fang by accident, you kill a rattlesnake twice. He dragged each one outside and chopped off its head. When he was done, 16 California black rattlers lay just beyond the door.

The screams abated. Bit countless times, his wife and daughters were either dead or dying. The next day, he buried them.

Joseph became known as "the hermit of Smith's mountain" (Palomar's early name). In the words of long-time resident Robert Asher, he was one of the region's "forlornlites." He'd sometimes wave to passers-by, even let himself be photographed, but kept away from people.

Two legends grew. In the 1870s he raised sheep, he said, “because there was nothing else to do.” When sheepherding declined — cattlemen wanted the bunchgrass-rich valleys for their herds — Joseph had no visible means of support. Yet he remained on the mountain for decades. To this day, many believe he used Palomar as a base, made frequent forays throughout the region, and actually found the lost treasure.

“On the past he does not dwell,” wrote Guy O. Glazier in the early 1920s. “Still I verily believe that Joseph Beresford, reportedly heir to an English name and fortune, is living on gold taken from the mythical Peg Leg mine.”

The second legend is actual fact. Palomar Mountain has surprisingly few rattlesnakes. That’s because for over 50 years, Joseph Beresford hunted down and slaughtered every rattler he could find.

**Sisters of Solitude**

Maybe they weren’t lonely. Maybe that’s just a flatlander’s citified view of two women who fled from human contact. But long-time residents of the mountain ponder the Frazier sisters’ profound seclusion. Edward Davis, who knew the “modest, retiring ladies,” said, “I often wonder what these women got out of life.”

Jim Frazier came to Palomar with his invalid wife and young daughter. He bought the old Morrison property and planned to raise hogs and cattle. The small, southwest-facing cabin stood on a promontory — today’s Frazier Point — below the snow-line, with an expansive view of San Diego County.

Jim’s wife died shortly after they moved in. He wrote his sisters, Mariah and Lizzie. Come west, he urged them. Help care for the child.

The sisters had a small farm near the Illinois/Missouri border. Mariah was tall and thin, a “handsome young woman,” writes Marion F. Beckler, “with personality and sparkle.” Petite Lizzie was much more withdrawn and “never very robust.” Both were dressmakers, “neat as a pin,” who enjoyed refined living. They sold everything and made the trek in 1895. Not wanting to be left alone, their mother joined them.

Jim drove his two-mule spring wagon to meet them in San Diego. He had awkward news: he’d married a woman with two children. He moved his new family to the east end of Mendenhall Valley (southeast of Palomar Observatory), where he’d built a cabin and barn. The cabin was cramped for five people and way too small for eight. His mother and sisters could return to Illinois or live somewhere nearby.

Mariah and Lizzie decided to stay. They rented the old Wolfe place in Mendenhall. A curse, some said, hung over the abandoned cabin: Wolfe, an ex-stage driver, fell in love with a married, red-headed woman. Her husband, also an ex-driver, shot and killed Wolfe, then left the region.

Shortly after moving in, the Fraziers’ mother died.

The sisters decided to homestead a canyon-like property at the edge of Barker Valley. To make a trail up to -Jim’s house, a good 2000 feet higher in elevation, they chopped down swaths of manzanita, thick acacia bushes, and poison oak. They rolled boulders to the side, first making sure no scorpions or rattlesnakes lurked in the shadows. Then, with pick and shovel, they graded the steep path.

For their cabin, Jim brought boards from Escondido. Davis: The “sisters, totally unused to manual labor, packed these boards on their backs, one at a time, over a crooked, rocky trail.” The work was arduous, but, Davis adds, “they asked no help or favors and received no assistance during all their life on Palomar.”

The cabin slowly took shape, but needed a roof. Halfway up the slope, Mariah found a grove of cedars. She and Lizzie made the climb every day until they had split enough three-foot shake shingles to cover their home.

Those who saw the property wondered why the sisters chose it. Ravines and hillocks afforded little arable land. The cabin was over a mile from Jim, their nearest neighbor, and at night coyotes howled nearby.

The sisters lived there for ten years. Mariah sold eggs and butter to neighbors and hotels. The Mendenhall children swore that Lizzie made the best biscuits around. In the beginning, writes Catherine Wood, the sisters "sometimes joined their neighbors in picnics." Mariah had the first Kodak camera on Palomar and loved taking pictures. Many of them, now long gone, were of a man who proposed marriage. But when Lizzie, whose health began to fail, objected, Mariah said no.

Arthritis wracked Lizzie's legs. Her stiffening hands made her specialty, lacework, impossible. In time, she could barely sew.

In 1898, to generate income Mariah began working for the post office. In those days Palomar had two: Jessee and Nellie, named for their first postmasters, Harriet L. Jessee and Nellie McQueen. Three times a week, regardless of the weather, Mariah rode the steep, serpentine Trujillo Trail down the south slope and back to - Jessee.

Mariah wore a bonnet and divided skirts. She refused to ride side-saddle, as was the fashion for women. Before she reached Jessee, she'd dismount and walk because, writes Davis, she was "too modest to be seen riding - astride."

During this period, Jim's wife left him. So the sisters moved in: summers at the Mendenhall cabin; winters, ten miles southwest, at Frazier Point. Lizzie's arthritis became so severe, she needed a rocking chair to move about. In time, her legs became paralyzed.

One spring morning, as Jim prepared to drive Lizzie to the summer cabin, he passed out in the wagon. Lizzie checked his pulse. Jim was dead.

"After that," writes Wood, "the two sisters, who were well thought of by all their neighbors, carried on alone."

Mariah did all the work: building fences and corrals, plowing, sewing, reaping. She carried every drop of water they used and tended their 60 head of cattle. She still delivered the mail, this time from Nellie to Jessee. Since she'd often return late at night, before she left, Mariah spread canvas across the windows and locked Lizzie in the cabin. If a man came near, Lizzie must not budge. To assure her sister's safety, Mariah jammed slivers of wood into the keyhole. Two dogs — some say "half-starved" — kept watch outside.

Mrs. Hodgie Salmons saw the sisters from afar for five years before they ever spoke to her. She became one of their few friends. One day, Hodgie wanted to pay Lizzie a call at the point. When she neared the cabin, she saw no sign of life. She shouted hellos and knocked several times. Rude hands fumbled with the lock. Lizzie opened the door a crack, smiled, and invited Hodgie into a "dark and gloomy" room.

"I thought no one was home," said Hodgie.

"When Mariah goes off," said Lizzie, "she locks everything up, including me. She's afraid some man will come and kill me."

Whenever a man came to the cabin, writes Davis, Mariah opened the door holding a knife in her calloused hand. "She was never known to shoot anybody or even threaten, but she was always ready."

One evening, as the sisters prepared dinner at Frazier Point, the stovepipe overheated. The ceiling of their four-room cabin caught fire. They had no water. The spring was a good 100 yards away. Mariah thought fast. Milk! She filled a pan, stood on a box, and doused the flames.

Somehow Lizzie made it outside. Davis: “No one, even Miss Lizzie herself, could explain how she accomplished the feat.”

Twice in the spring of 1918, when Mariah harrowed fields at the East Mendenhall property, she tripped and - couldn’t move. As she clung to the reins, mules dragged her back to the cabin.

On a Sunday in November, 1918, Mariah spent most of the morning chasing down stray calves. After stowing the last one back in the corral, she entered the cabin, ringing wet and glassy-eyed, and slumped on the bed.

Noticing that Mariah had become strangely quiet, Lizzie went to her side. To Lizzie’s horror, her beloved sister — and life support system for the past 15 years — was dead.

A shocked Lizzie straightened Mariah’s hair, crossed her hands on her chest, and prepared her to receive - mourners.

For a touch of culture amid the wild, the sisters had a little bell, with a white handkerchief attached. Lizzie always rang it at dinnertime. To attract attention, Lizzie opened the door, propped herself against her chair, and began ringing the bell. The sounds echoed through the cabin, but the nearest neighbors, the Mendenhalls, were a good two miles away. Lizzie shook and shook the bell. Every ring shot pain through her crooked fingers.

No one heard. Mariah’s body began to decompose. Lizzie needed to go outside. Inch by inch, dragging a pail of water behind, she lugged herself up to their apple orchard on a small rise. Lizzie rang the little bell for two cold days and nights.

On Wednesday, Retha Mae Mendenhall hadn’t seen Mariah ride past their house for quite some time. She and Marion Davis decided to check up on the sisters. As their wagon approached the orchard, they noticed something white waving among the trees. Then they heard a slow, soft tinkling.

They found Lizzie, staring straight ahead, ringing and ringing the bell.

Lizzie stayed for a while with the Salmons, Louis, and her friend Hodgie, then returned to Illinois. She died, soon after, while eating breakfast.

Neighbors buried Mariah under a large black oak, about 40 feet from the house. In 1929, Edward Davis visited the site. He saw “a stake at the head and a white rock at the foot,” but “no name, date, or other sign to tell even that a grave was there.”

QUOTATIONS:

1. Peter Brueggeman: Tradition calls her Maria, but “land office records record her name as Mariah - Frazier.”
2. Edward Davis: The Frazier sisters “were very refined, honorable, honest and cultivated people and not used to physical labor such as starting a ranch high up in the mountains.”
3. Davis: Mariah “always performed her work the hardest way, when it could have been performed easier by the horses.”

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