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EDUCATION AT WALKER'S BASIN

1897-1910

Mary Rankin's Story

By Gilbert Gia
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(In 1971 the California Odyssey Project, California State University, Bakersfield, interviewed Mary Alice (Williams) Rankin (1891-1973) about growing up at Walker's Basin in Kern County, California. Gilbert Gia rewrote the interview in three parts, and they were sequentially published in the March, April, and May issues of the 2010 *Pulse*, newsletter of the Kern Division, California Retired Teachers' Association.)

My grandfather Tom Williams was reared in England and mined right up until the time he homesteaded in Walker's Basin. He knew only little about ranching, and that necessitated his only child, Nickolas (my father), to learn how to be a cowboy at a very young age.

Nick went to school at the old schoolhouse where Mrs. H.P. Bender, then Cora McGrann, was the first teacher.¹ Nick remembers a sound thrashing she gave him one time, and there's no doubt he needed it, as some of the stories he told us prove. In the early-1880s my father rode his little mare to school. She was always fast and willing, and on the way home my father prayed for jack rabbits. A fleet horse and an agile, fast rabbit made for great sport, but one time when Nick got home the mare lay down instead of eating. My grandmother said, "Nicky, you've been chasing rabbits again. You shall walk to school tomorrow!" That was severe punishment because my father was fast becoming the proverbial cowboy who would walk a mile to catch a horse so he could ride it a quarter-of-a-mile.

When he grew to young manhood he often rode across the mountains to Hot Springs Valley to associate with the young people there. One day the Carden brothers had a doings on their ranch, and that was where Nick met the beautiful, blond Alice Yates, who they called Ali.

¹ Cora Bender became a Bakersfield principal and later was president of the Kern County Retired Teachers Association.

Ali was about 19 and the finest woman rider in the whole country. She broke her own colts and took care of her mother's cattle on Greenhorn Mountain. She rode a western saddle when working on the range, which shocked many women, especially my grandmother, who called it riding clothes-pin fashion.

That day at Carden's, Ali (my mother) was riding sidesaddle on her favorite colt, Dexter, and she dared Nick to jump on behind. It was in Nick's nature to take a dare, especially from a pretty girl. The horse broke into a gallop, and Nick and Ali held on well until the saddle began to come apart. Nick saw a golden opportunity to play the hero, so when he jumped, he pulled Ali off with him. Nick was highly entertained all the next day helping her fix her saddle.

My father didn't leave the Carden's until he persuaded my mother to break her engagement with another fellow and brave the frontier with him as his wife. Nick was an ardent suitor, so their courtship of 1890 lasted only about three weeks. They had \$17 between the two of them, but they were undaunted; both were eager to face life together. They rode their horses down the toll road built by Col. Baker, were married that afternoon in Bakersfield, and put up their horses in a livery stable on Nineteenth Street. The next morning when they saddled up Ali's horse didn't like the sound his hooves made on the stable boards, and he reared out of that livery bucking and scattering people who were walking in the street.

My father built a very nice home for his bride on a beautiful, peaceful spot among tall pine trees and provided for his growing family by raising cattle and hauling freight for miners on Piute Mountain. But the happy home was broken up by my mother's sudden passing in 1899. It left my father with four little children, all under eight years. Our papa sent us over to our other grandparents to go to school in Hot Springs Valley.² My grandparents were 69 years of age by then, but they opened their home to their son and his brood of helpless little ones. They gave them loving care, and taught them to be kind, honest and thrifty, and to love the Bible and trust in God.

Father was sorely in need of a helpmate, so in 1900 he married May McClure in Havilah. Surely love is blind, either that or May McClure had a lot of courage to undertake such a big responsibility. Eight girls were born to their union.

Before the first school was started in Havilah in 1875, young people had to teach themselves, or their parents taught them, or it happened however they could get education. The one room schools that came later turned-out people with real good educations.

We went to school from nine o'clock in the morning until four in the afternoon, and we had good teachers in our little school. We were always thoroughly drilled in the fundamentals of each subject we carried. There were very few disciplinary problems. The teachers

² today's Lake Isabella area

usually came out and played with us at noon and recesses, and if they didn't, we got off hunting rattlesnakes.

We had a little organ and were taught many lovely, old songs, as well as patriotic songs. While we were having our morning sing, it was not an unusual sight to see four or five lizards peek out from behind the rafters. As many lizards as I have handled, I was never able to decide whether they were amused or just plain curious when they pumped their bodies up and down while listening to our melodious voices.

We were seldom late, and we seldom missed a day. All the social life we had was going to school, and that was about the only time we associated with other children. I was sometimes late because I was the oldest child in the family and I had to help with the work. Sometimes it was making bread for about thirteen of us.

It is interesting to me to compare the recreational facilities and activities of the 1890s and 1900s with those of today. When we went to school we walked a mile-and-a-half in all sorts of weather and were seldom absent. I do not remember any playground equipment supplied by the school. Sometimes we would take a ball to school and play catch or ante-over. We played Field Sticks, Duck on the Rock, Blind Man's Bluff, Drop the Handkerchief, Luke and Jacob, and Pussy Wants a Corner.

When we really wanted action we played tag in the large pine trees around the school house. The trunks and limbs were well

polished from much use. We climbed to the top then slid down the outer ends of the branches. We would gain a great deal of speed but seldom did anyone get hurt. For real thrills we climbed sapling pines to the top, then swung out, took the top down with us to the ground, and then sprung up again, still holding the top of the tree. It would take us high in the air. We had fun watching the expression on the faces of city children and other people when we did that.

We spent many hours playing cowboy. We all had stick horses and lassos. Many necks were burned with those ropes. When we got too big to ride stick horses, the Indians taught us to make and use bows and arrows. We hunted the fields for arrowheads lost in ancient times by some Indian brave. Then we all went game hunting, the whole school, about a dozen of us. Lizards were small game, but they were very good to practice on. Rattlesnakes were big game and supplied us with the most satisfaction.

We didn't graduate from our own schools then. When we finished the Eighth Grade we were required to go to another school to graduate, a centrally located school for the other schools. We had to go to Bodfish. Well, that was quite a long way off for us in the mode of travel then. So my sister Virginia and I never got our diploma from the Eighth Grade. We never went to high school, but when my two sisters and I, in our turn, went to Western Normal in Stockton, California, and we could compete very favorably with others who had had high school work.

We were staying with my grandparents when my brother, Boy Williams, was walking barefooted to school one morning, and he stepped on two snakes in the crevice of a big rock. The snakes were cold and slow, but you can imagine how much speed those snakes put into Boy. It had been deeply instilled in us that rattlesnakes should be killed because they bit our dogs and cattle. We suffered loss in our stock that way, and that was why we were martyrs to the cause of exterminating all the rattlesnakes for miles around.

Hunting rattlesnakes at school was our most exciting activity of all, much to the dismay of our teachers. During the noon hour quite a circle of us would go out looking for rattlesnakes, and once we found one we simply turned deaf ears to the frantic ringing of the school bell until we had that snake dug out of its hole or out from under a pile of rocks.

One day we saw a real large rattlesnake slithering across the school yard and heading for a squirrel hole. He was about half-way in when we put a forked pine limb across his back to hold him down. One of us ran home a mile to get a shovel so we could dig him out.

My sister Virginia was holding the stick when the shovel arrived. We dug up a lot of earth until we finally got that snake all out, but by then he was tired of that nonsense. He drew back and stuck his head right up to Virginia's face. She moved back fast, but she didn't let him get away. You see, it was a terrible disgrace to let one get away. We were such martyrs.

We removed the rattles for our trophy collection, then we performed a major operation on him and took out all his fat to render and store in bottles. Rattlesnake fat was worth ten dollars an ounce in drug stores. People used it to limber up stiff joints. That's what they believed.

One time Boy and I roped a big rattler and pulled him two or three miles to our home to proudly show our father. Father was in the corral branding calves when it fully dawned on him what we had on the end of that rope. Oh, he swore, not under his breath either, as he climbed the fence and stomped the snake. My brother and I were crestfallen to have Father take our heroic deed that way.

When Virginia and I went to school over in Hot Springs Valley in the early 1900s we were afraid of Mr. Dobbs, who was then Kern County Superintendent of Schools and kind of a severe man. Later I was going to school in Walker's Basin when Jess Stockton's father, Robert L. Stockton, was a cattleman up around the Glennville country and became Superintendent of Schools.

About twice a year he showed up at our school in a buggy with a nice span of gray horses. Mr. Stockton had white hair and a white mustache, even when he was a young man. He matched his team. He was such a kind and nice man and understanding of the rural people. We never were afraid of him. Mr. Stockton encouraged me to be a teacher, and he told me he thought I would be a good one. That

inspired me, gave me a goal to work toward, and I did.

I took the Eighth Grade twice hoping to go the next year to teacher school, but that way was not made available for me. We had a stepmother by that time, and I was out of school about three years before I finally ran away from home. I went to work for a dollar a day and saved my money, and about three years later I went to the Western Normal for teachers at Stockton. My two sisters and I, in our turn, competed very favorably with others there who had had high school work.

And so I went to school in Stockton. I went two semesters. I thought perhaps I'd have to go another one, but I was able to pass. In those days we didn't have to take our fifth year, or college, or anything else. If we studied up at home and passed the county examination, we could teach. I took the examination in Merced County because the Kern County test was coming up a month later, and I thought if I could find my weak spots and study up between times, then I could take it again in Kern County. But I passed in Merced County.

Then I went to an old friend of my mother's and grandparent's in Isabella, Old Mr. Barton, asked him for the job teaching school at Old Isabella, and he gave it to me.³ So I taught there for two years for \$75 a month. I stayed with my grandparents and rode horseback three miles each way.

I had about 12 children in all the eight grades. There were

³ **about 1908**

Indians, and Mexicans, and Portuguese, and all kinds of children, and I got along fine with all of them.

The three girls of my father's first family educated ourselves after finishing the grammar grades. My sister Beatrix and I became school teachers, Virginia a registered nurse, and the other girls became competent office workers and have always held responsible positions. Boy was the only male child in the family. He went to war and later on had a business in San Bernardino County with his uncle.

Oh, another thing about those snakes. It must have been right after I was married that I took our car out for the women's club. Just a ways from our house I saw a rattler moving through a patch of grass. There wasn't a good stick or stone in sight, but I got him by the tail just as he started into a squirrel hole. I whirled him around and around and beat him on the ground until he was tame enough that I could put my heel on his head and kill him. I would have had some bad dreams that night had I not caught Mr. Snake.

I wanted to go right back then and there and take his rattles off and get his fat, but I hadn't time, and I hadn't anything to put him in, either. So I laid him out on the car's floorboards, up front, and drove on to get my passengers.

About eight women were sitting in our eight passenger car, including an old English lady up front with me and a funny little lady from Isabella, Mrs. Barton. Then one of these little ladies imagined

that something was touching her, I guess, because she said, "Oh, bless us! What's that!" Then the lady sitting next to her saw the snake, and she said, "Mary Rankin don't ever touch me again." I picked up the snake and tied him onto the bumper with my handkerchief. That was how I got him home.

Mary's parents were Nicholas "Nick" James Williams and Alice "Allie" Williams. Mary Williams married Walker Rankin, Jr. His parents were Walker Rankin (1832-1918) and Lavinia Estell Lightner. For more information about the Rankin family and the Rankin Guest Ranch see [www.kerncattlemen.org/Rankin Family Home Page.htm](http://www.kerncattlemen.org/Rankin%20Family%20Home%20Page.htm)
www.rankinranch.com/

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