

An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

The Unlikely Homesteader

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The unlikely homesteader, whom we called Willett, hails from Bangor, Maine, just about as far away from Alpine as you can get and still be in the continental United States. The fact that Willett would pick up roots and move to Alpine to stake out a homestead is unusual for several reasons. First, Willett was born in 1813 which makes this pioneer nearly 70 years old when Alpine first welcomed this traveler. Next, Willett was a single person, having lost the love of a lifetime during the first year of marriage, never to marry again. And Willett had no kin to help settle and “prove up” the homestead – that’s a lot to take on at age 70. But, perhaps the most amazing and admirable fact about our unlikely homesteader is that Willett was a woman! Her full name: Louisa Alcott Snow Willett.

So, why would a 70-year-old, single, childless woman, retire from school teaching and move all the way across the country to begin a new life as a homesteader? Well, we don’t really know. Maybe adventure was in her blood ever since her ancestors, John & Nicholas Snow, came to America in 1623 on the *Good Ship Anne*, the relief ship that brought aid to the Pilgrims. What we do know is that this was a woman of great personal strength, determination, strong faith, and always willing to lend a helping hand. And we know that she was a strong supporter of the Alpine community. After “proving up” her land (a homesteader’s term for improving the property value) she donated a portion of her property for a community burial ground which she named Mount Pisgah cemetery. This was the first community cemetery, with the earliest known grave being that of Adalaide Murray, an infant who died in 1890.



It is reported that Mrs. Willett was kind to all, and if anyone came to her looking for work she would give them a job enlarging her house. With no shortage of labor, relatives say that her house became quite a beautiful home. Arthur Gray, her great-great-nephew, tells the story of a drunken man who came by looking for work. Mrs. Willett first scolded him for his sinful ways and made him sober up. Afterwards she gave him clean clothes and put him to work.

Although Mrs. Willett was a childless widow, she had a lot to do with increasing the population of Alpine. She apparently extolled the virtues of Alpine to all her relatives far and wide, and it wasn’t long before names like Snow, Gray, Stephenson, Taylor began to show up on the mail route. According to her grandnephew, George Stephenson, when his parents moved here to live with Aunt Willett, “Things were a little exaggerated.” It seems that Aunt Willett’s enthusiasm for Alpine lead her to oversell its attributes. But they liked it well enough to stay on anyway.

Louisa Alcott Snow Willett died in 1907 at age 94. She was the fourteenth and last person to be buried in the Mount Pisgah cemetery. This brave and gutsy woman who set out alone to stake out a homestead claim at the age of 70 will long be remembered for her contributions to the little mountain settlement called Alpine.