

An Alpine History Mystery Solved!

What gifts did the Foss children make for Christmas in 1888?

The Foss family, Edward, Carrie, and six children were early pioneers in Alpine, setting up their rancho at Tule Springs in 1875. Pioneer life was very difficult in the late 1800's and it was particularly hard for Carrie Foss whose health was declining as a result of the physical and emotional demands of raising a family and taking care of farm chores a full continent away from her childhood home and family. In her Christmas letter of 1888 to her dear sister Annie she wrote of physical decline and how difficult it was to put a good meal on the table. One thing that kept her spirits up was the help of her children, who made Christmas gifts for family and friends that year.

Our mystery question for December is: What gifts did the Foss children make for Christmas in 1888? We find the answer in Carrie's letter to Annie:

... So you ought to see the pen wipers and the pin cushions of different kinds. Pearl has made Alice [Sophronia Nichols' daughter] a flat pin cushion... and a smaller one for Mr. Anderson. Harry has made a very pretty one for Alice Field... and Percy has begun one like it for Lottie Snow. Then all three have made pen wipers.

Do you know what pen wipers are? Today, most people use ball point pens or felt tip markers, but in 1888, the writing implement of choice was the fountain pen. This was sometimes a messy business as the metal tip of a pen had to be dipped in an ink well prior to writing. The writer would put pen to paper and scroll out a few words until the ink ran out, then dip again. As the writing progressed, dry ink would build up on the tip of the pen and would need to be cleaned off – thus the need for a piece of fabric to wipe the pen clean. In 1888, the Foss children might have made pen wipers that looked something like these examples from www.TheCatLadyAntiques.com



In those days, everyday people did their own sewing and stitchery whenever they could. This required thread, fabric, scissors, and of course needles and pins. Small straight pins were used to keep the cut fabric aligned while stitching. As the sewing progressed, the pins would be removed and stuck in a pin cushion to hold them until the next use and to keep them off the floor so they didn't get stepped on with stocking feet – Ouch! Pin cushions in 1888 made from scraps of fabric may have looked something like this photo also from The Cat Lady Antiques website.

We hope that 2013 has brought you joy and that you have shared it with family, friends and those in need this holiday season. Thank you for reading and solving our December Alpine History Mystery. You can find the complete mystery story at: www.alpinehistory.org/alpine_history_mysteries.html. At this same site, you can also enjoy mysteries from prior months. We welcome your comments and questions so please send us a note to mystery@alpinehistory.org or to Alpine Historical Society, P.O. Box 382, Alpine, CA 91903-0382.