

OLD WEST STORIES

Mary Taylor Nash Woolsey Fry Baxter

Mary did not have very good luck keeping her husbands alive, but she surely had some good luck in her selections and in their passing, even if the last two were much younger than her. With the passing of each, Mary was getting richer. To be perfectly fair to Mary, she used the name Nash, but she was never married to him and his passing is not only unknown, it did not benefit Mary.

Mary was born to poor Georgia sharecroppers, Patterson and Mary Johnson Taylor in 1844. One year later her father died. Nothing is known of her childhood, but she was obviously poorly educated, but by no means unintelligent. There are unsupported rumors that she was in Texas by the age of seventeen. We do know that in the spring of 1869 she joined a wagon train in Sulphur Springs, Texas, that was headed for California. We also know that by then she was accustomed to hard work and was alert for opportunities. Her traveling companion was a Mr. Nash and she was considered his fiancée and addressed as Mrs. Nash.

On a hot, late afternoon in August of 1869 the wagon train bearing Mrs. Nash pulled into Gila Bend, Arizona Territory. This is how Mary related the events some years later to a friend: *"I was tard of the trip and my husband and I had been fussing...so I said when I can I'll leave this outfit. A big man sat on his horse at the camp fire and heard me say it. He said Ladie if you want to leave these people... I'll take you. I live a few miles west and will protect you. I was despart so I told him I would go with him. He said get on behind me hold onto my belt. As we road...he said I have a housekeeper but she is Mexican you are to be lady of the house. When we got to the hous and the woman came out he said I have brought you a companion. The woman said I am glad for I do get lonesome. We shuck hands. He said Ruf you take care of her. Next day she said you need Clothes and things... He said I will take you to Uma. [In Yuma two days' ride.] he interduced me as his Houskeeper, taken me to the Sheriff residence and asked the Lady to help me get what I wanted. Gave me a \$20 gold piece...As we road home he talked his experience was like reading a novel. Next day we had a Harte to hart talk. And I became Mrs. Wolsy."*

Nash disappeared with the wagon train and years later on December 22, 1928, the *Arizona Republican* would report that King Samuel Woolsey (see last month's article) had traded "six sacks of flour or corn meal" for Mary. On May 27, 1871, twenty-two months later, the two were married at Woolsey's Agua Caliente Ranch. It was the first marriage ceremony performed after the organization of Maricopa County.

Woolsey had established a store and telegraph station at Stanwix, just across the Gila River from the ranch. Mary took it over and turned it into a real trading center. She had developed a four-acre garden and imported bees from San Diego. She was able to provide produce to nearby ranchers, wagon trains and freighters that passed through the area. She was usually alone at the store and hard cases would often try to take advantage. When one of them attempted to steal some produce he heard the click of a revolver as Mary used two hands to cock the heavy weapon. He put the produce back and fled the store. She unknowingly hired a murderer who had a wounded shoulder, but armed herself and assisted in his arrest when he was later identified.

Woolsey sold a half interest in his Agua Caliente Ranch to David Neahr in order to raise capital for investment in Phoenix properties and a nearby ranch known as Lyle Ranch. Then he built a road from Phoenix to Yuma, making sure it went via Stanwix. He lived in Phoenix while Mary remained at Stanwix.

On June 30, 1879, King Woolsey died in at the Lyle Ranch and Mary rushed to Phoenix. She immediately made arrangements for the funeral and burial, retained attorneys and applied for administratrix of Woolsey's estate. She posted a \$30,000 bond and entered into a new arena of activities that she would perform several times in the future. She disposed of property, including 626 hogs, to settle with creditors. She refused to acknowledge publicly that Woolsey had three children, two girls and a boy, by the housekeeper she had been introduced to as Ruf.

An attorney for the three children went to court to seek property and \$75 per month support for each child. Mary claimed the children were not legitimate heirs and not the children of Woolsey. While the judge mulled over his decision, Mary resigned as administratrix and appointed W. W. Kales in her stead. A week later the judge ruled in favor of the children, but reduced the support to \$50 per month. Mary's lawyers immediately appealed and on May 20, 1880, a new judge reversed the decision and directed the children to return \$101.50 already paid. A preacher convinced Mary to provide the girls a pittance, but she refused to recognize the boy, probably because he was conceived after she had joined Woolsey.

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In the meantime, Mary's mother had relocated to Phoenix, gained some property and died. Mary also administered that estate. Under her able hands the properties blossomed and became very profitable. She even sued Neahr for control of the Agua Caliente Ranch, but was rebuffed.

On November 3, 1884, Mary married Frank W. Fry in Phoenix. Frank was twelve years younger than Mary and owned a saloon in Phoenix. They honeymooned at the Agua Caliente Ranch.

They soon bought 160 acres just west of the springs at Agua Caliente. Adjacent to that property was a large parcel of land owned by a near-derehict named "Uncle Joe" Blackwell. Uncle Joe was in his seventies and living on a pension of \$8 per month. The newlyweds took Uncle Joe under their wing, brought him to the ranch to live and loaned him money. Uncle Joe died on September 5, 1888, and the Frys were the only heirs in his will. Frank Fry was named as executor of Blackwell's estate.

There was a hitch to this new acquisition. A fellow named Frank Wagner was working on a timber claim that overlapped Blackwell's claim to the property. Mary tried to buy Wagner off, Fry tried to run him off and in September of 1889, Wagner killed off Fry. Wagner was exonerated.

Mary replaced Fry as executor of Blackwell's estate and was appointed as administratrix of Fry's estate who had died intestate. Fry was survived by a father in Ohio, a mother, a brother and two married sisters all living in Phoenix. Mary retained her lawyers again and went to Probate Court under Judge Frank Baxter. Baxter proved to be a friendly judge for Mary and granted her every request.

In fact, Baxter was more than friendly, three weeks after settlement of the court decisions, on December 28, Judge Joseph H. Kibbey joined Judge Baxter and Mary in holy matrimony. The judge was nine years younger than Mary.

In 35 years Mary transformed herself from a young woman with nothing to her name except the clothes she was wearing into a prominent and wealthy woman with vast land holdings and a highly respected judge for a husband, When Arizona became a state in 1912, Judge Baxter was elected Superior Court Judge of Yuma County. He retired from the bench at age sixty-seven and practiced law until flu and pleurisy took his life in 1923. Three weeks after the judge's death, Mary applied as executrix. She reported no property in his name, but over 57 in her name scattered across the lower part of Arizona. Besides those properties, when the estate was settled, she received title to nineteen parcels owned as community property in Yuma and Parker, Arizona, a twenty-acre farm, 6,850 shares of stock and a fine home in Yuma.

Mary died in a Phoenix hospital on December 20, 1928. Governor George W. P. Hunt ordered all flags to be flown at half-mast. The first time that had ever happened for a woman. She left an estate worth approximately \$2,000,000. Mary and Frank are buried in the Yuma City Cemetery.



Tombstone of Frank and Mary Baxter in the Yuma Pioneer Cemetery

Thanks to Samantha Bossick of Yuma for the photo

Source: Documentation found at the Pioneer Cemetery Association.