

From Kentucky to Oregon:

The travels and pioneer life of Mary Ann Dickinson Adair

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In the United States in the year 1848 gold was found in California, the Mexican-American War ended, Henry David Thoreau was busy sharing his views on civil disobedience, cholera was a major health threat,¹ and a young Illinois politician named Abraham Lincoln was asked to be governor of the newly organized Oregon Territory (he declined).² It was also in 1848, that Mary Ann Dickinson Adair and her family left their home in Kentucky and began a trip headed for that same new Oregon Territory.³

Mary Ann Dickinson was born on February 15, 1816, in Louisville, Kentucky. She married her husband, John Adair, January 2, 1834, at the age of eighteen. John Adair was a lawyer and participated in politics.⁴ It was these political interests that led the Adair family to Oregon. As Mary Ann states in her 1883 reminiscences dictated to her daughter, Laura, "My husband having been appointed by President Polk Collector of the Port of Astoria, Oregon, we left Louisville in November '48 with our family of six children."⁵

Mary Ann and her family did not take the Oregon Trail, nor did they take the long sea voyage around Cape Horn. Instead, the Adair family traveled to the other side of North America by crossing the Isthmus of Panama. This long journey required both sea voyages and an arduous trek over the dangerous terrain of Panama. The first step in the journey was the trip by river steamer from Louisville to New Orleans. After a brief stay in New Orleans, the family left on another steamer headed for the Port of Chagres, in Panama. Mary Ann said later of the trip, "Before we left the city [New Orleans] rumours [sic.] of the discovery of wonderfully rich gold mines in California were in circulation and a

¹ "1848," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia (April 19, 2006), <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1848> (accessed May 16, 2006).

² Terence O'Donnell. *That Balance So Rare, The Story of Oregon*. (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society, 1988), p. 118.

³ Laura P. Barker. *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883. Adair Family Papers. Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁴ Barker. *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated 1890. Adair Family Papers.

⁵ Barker, *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers, p. 1.

specimen of the dust exhibited. Another report still more startling to us was that cholera had broken out in the city which was only too true. Fortunately no case occurred on our passage of eleven days.”⁶

After arriving in Chagres, the family had to disembark into a small lifeboat that carried them up the Chagres River. The trip up the river lasted a few days, with the family finding local sleeping arrangements each night. Mary Ann remembered, “The natives received us kindly, and gave us the best they had, which was a hammock to sleep in.”⁷ She also wrote about the natives in a letter to her mother about the boat trip, “We had two boats, one for the luggage and one for ourselves. These small boats are rowed by the natives in a state of nudity. We requested them to wear their pants (they had taken off their shirts) so they put them on awhile, but soon had them off and tied around the middle of their bodies.”⁸

After a few days on the river, the mode of travel was switched to crossing over land. “We were carried in hammocks – two men to each, and two to alternate. The roads were very bad,” Mary Ann later stated.⁹ After two days of hard travel, the group reached the west coast of Panama. Once there, they had to wait a month for the California steamer to arrive. Cholera was a constant threat during this waiting period, but the family managed to stay healthy. Once it arrived, the voyage on the California steamer to San Francisco took twenty-eight days.¹⁰

Arriving in San Francisco was not pleasing to Mary Ann. She remembered, “San Francisco was an uninviting place in every way at that time. The day after our arrival there

⁶ Barker, *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸ Barker, *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother* dated January 5, 1849. Adair Family Papers, p. 34.

⁹ Barker, *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

was a heavy snow-storm. I cannot say anything in commendation of our boarding place. I suffered from cold all the time, and the fare at table was disgusting.”¹¹ After a short stay in the city, the Adairs left San Francisco on March 6, 1849, headed for their final destination, Astoria, Oregon.¹² This final leg of the trip took another twenty-nine days. The family all arrived safely at their new home on April 3, 1849. Mary Ann said, “The sun was just going down when we cast anchor in the little bay of Astoria.”¹³ The complete trip from Kentucky to Astoria took over four months.

Of Astoria, Mary Ann remembered, “There were few houses in the place and about seven families. There were only four men, all [the rest] having gone to the mines in California.”¹⁴ The family stayed in boarding houses at first. Mary Ann wrote to her mother on April 9, 1849, “We are boarding with a very kind woman whose husband is now in the mines, which is the case with all the families here – the men leave their families and go down and dig gold for four to six months and return, bringing some two or three thousand dollars with them.”¹⁵ Astoria was so small that there were not enough children for a school, nor was there a church or minister. As a Methodist, Mary Ann hoped that a minister would soon arrive, and she wrote to her mother, “I will try and get up a Sabbath School as soon as we get settled.”¹⁶ Mary Ann and John did managed to start the Sunday school shortly after that letter was written. It was the first in Astoria., and was attended by many of the children and young people in the town.¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Barker. *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother* dated April 9, 1849. Adair Family Papers, p. 39.

¹³ Barker, *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers, p. 5

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Barker. *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother* dated April 9, 1849. Adair Family Papers, p. 40.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁷ Barker, *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers.

As newcomers in Astoria, the Adairs were given help and support by the settlers already established there. They had their first taste of fresh Oregon salmon, “probably speared by the Indians,”¹⁸ and they were given food and loaned tools by their neighbors. Mary Ann wrote to her mother, “We have had a lot presented to us on condition that we would build upon it, and our next neighbor, who has a fine garden, has kindly offered us the half of it – so that I think we shall be very well supplied with vegetables, and the same neighbor has fine cows and we can have the milk of as many as we choose to milk.”¹⁹ Despite the kindness of the people in Astoria, the Adairs missed their family back home and desperately waited for letters to arrive. Mary Ann later said, “ There were no regular mail facilities for Oregon for sometime after our arrival. It would be months between our letters.”²⁰ Mary Ann begged her family to write more often in every letter that she sent home.²¹

In October of 1849, the Adairs moved to their new house on their Donation land claim. Mary Ann said about the new house, “This new house seemed very grand to the children. There were two rooms and a large attic, besides kitchen and pantry – also a front and back porch.”²² The Donation Land Law of 1850 made land free to white immigrants without having to purchase it from the native Indians.²³ When Mary Ann and her family first arrived in Astoria, they believed that they would only be staying for four years. They had to live on their land claim for that set period of time in order for it to become officially theirs. Mary Ann wrote to her mother shortly after arriving saying, “Now I think I can make myself

¹⁸ Barker, *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers, p. 6

¹⁹ Barker. *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother* dated April 9, 1849. Adair Family Papers, p. 41.

²⁰ Barker, *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers, p. 8.

²¹ Barker. *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother*. Adair Family Papers.

²² Barker, *My Mother's Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers, p. 9.

²³ O'Donnell. *That Balance So Rare, The Story of Oregon*, p. 57.

contented to stay four years, I hope by that time to have made and saved enough to live on in the states comfortably.”²⁴

After a full year in the Territory, Mary Ann wrote to her mother about the Oregon weather, “Our bad weather has commenced, and now we are to have rain, rain, for the next three months. The winters here are awful, the summers are delightful – but look out after that.”²⁵ Despite the rainy weather, Mary Ann seemed contented with living in Oregon. She spoke many times in her letters about how healthy the children were becoming, and how successful their gardens were. She told her mother in the spring of 1851, “We enjoy fine health – that is one great blessing that should make us thankful and contented.”²⁶

As the first few years of the Adair’s new pioneer life passed, the society of Astoria, and all of Oregon continued to grow. Mary Ann remembers traveling to Portland with friends. She said about the fledgling city, “Portland was a ragged little place – a few scattered houses, and stumps in every direction. Oregon City was the principal town then. It had one large brick store.”²⁷ John Adair occasionally took trips to Washington and was re-appointed Collector of Astoria by President Pierce.²⁸ Mary Ann wrote to her mother and brother in April of 1852, “Our salary will be increased this winter our Delegate assures us, to five thousand dollars per annum, and that will enable us to go home after we have secured our land. That appears like an age to wait, but we must stick it out, hard as it is, for the sake of the children. This land will be valuable to them.”²⁹

²⁴ Barker. *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother* dated April 9, 1849. Adair Family Papers, p. 41.

²⁵ Barker. *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother*, dated September 29, 1850. Adair Family Papers, p. 42.

²⁶ Barker. *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother*, dated April 5, 1851. Adair Family Papers., p. 45.

²⁷ Barker, *My Mother’s Reminiscences* dated April 3, 1883, Adair Family Papers, p. 12.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Barker. *Letters From My Mother To Her Mother*, dated April 25, 1852. Adair Family Papers, p. 48.

When Mary Ann set out on her trip to Oregon she believed that they would only be staying for a few short years. They would establish their land claim and then be free to return home. She wrote to her mother and brother three years after arriving, "My highest wish is to be on a farm somewhere in Ky. That Mother may come and stay 'till she gets tired, and I can see Laura and yourself anytime. John and I often talk about the pleasure we should have in old Ky., and make many plans for the future."³⁰ Despite these wishes, Mary Ann Adair never returned to live in Kentucky. She died in 1893 after spending more than forty years in Oregon, and serving as one of the founding pioneer women in the state.³¹

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Laura P. Barker. Adair Family Papers. Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

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