

# A BABY ON HER HIP and A GUN IN HER HAND

The Story of Molly Kesler, Idaho Pioneer

By  
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Rain fell through the old trees in the Willamette Valley in Oregon in 1875, sliding down the windows of a small cabin. Inside five year old Mary Lou (Molly) Flanery sat on her little trunk, tears filling her eyes. Her high button shoes tapped the hollow side, the sound reflecting the pain in her heart. Molly was about to make the most difficult decision a child is ever forced make.

Her Mother and Father were separating and Molly had to decide who she would live with. The old trees around the cabin swayed in the wind as Molly slid off the trunk, slipping her fingers into her Mother's hand, tearfully leaving her Father alone in the empty room.

Molly and her Mother boarded the stage coach for Grand Ronde, Oregon, where they lived there until her Mother's death in 1881. Unable to locate her Father, eleven year old Molly moved to a ranch with a family named Fairbanks, working for room and board. By the time she was fifteen Molly cooked for a family of ten in addition to helping with ranch chores. Mrs. Fairbanks was kind to Molly, insisting she continue her schooling.

Life on the western frontier in the late 1800's was challenging, not easy for the weak of body or spirit. Molly was neither of these. Chances for excitement and fun occurred in some unusual ways.

Bill Newbry was a cowhand on the Fairbank's ranch who had contracted to break 500 head of horses for saddle stock. Bill was a handsome young man and infatuated with Molly. In the evenings he hung around the kitchen after supper was over, helping Molly dry dishes while they talked. Trying to find a way to spend more time together Bill ask Molly if she would like to help him break horses in the evenings after finishing chores.

It was a perfect setting for a summer romance. Molly rode the broncs, her golden hair flying against the setting sun, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Never once was Molly thrown. That may have been the reason the love affair ended when the horses were broken, however, Molly always looked back on that summer as one of her happiest.

In 1886, she met and married Charles Willey. Three years later, in May of 1889, the young couple and a new baby joined a wagon train headed for Idaho. One of the children with the train had whooping cough, and before the trip was over, every child came down with the disease. Adding to the misery of the journey, rain fell nearly every day of the month-long trip. Finally in June the weary travelers arrived at the Payette River in Long Valley.

Snow was melting in the high country, and the Payette River was running high. Dark waters swirled dangerous and deep as the wagons prepared to ford. A young cowboy, who had acted as guide on the trip, volunteered to lead out with his cow pony. Wrapping the rope around his saddle horn he tossed the other end to Charlie, who tied it to the wagon tongue. The cowboy's horse waded into the turbulence, and began swimming. Eight horses pulling their wagon followed behind. The water hit the wagon, pounding against the bed and lashing the animals, pulling them downstream.

Molly clung to the baby with one hand and tried to hang on to a rope with the other. She would remember it as one of the most harrowing moments of her life. The horses swam for the opposite shore, their hooves searching for solid ground. The wagon wheels hit river rock, crunching and wobbling while the wagon bed swayed uncertainly, finally the horses and the wagon settled onto the sandy shore. Molly's hand was burned from hanging on to the rope. She had nearly abandoned hope as the wagon lurched and surged in the swirling waters.

The settlers camped, then homesteaded farms near the river crossing in "Sagebrush Flats." The settlement would become known as Spink.

"Then came the tug," Molly remembered. "We had cleared the brush from the land and was aiming to raise our gardens. The vegetables was showin' nice an' green when cattlemen brought in a bunch of longhorns. They not only ruined our gardens but after the roundup, we found most of our milk cows was gone.

"Our places weren't fenced yet, so we couldn't keep our stock to home nor theirs away. But come next spring we laid fer 'em. When they started eatin' our garden greens, the men folk rounded up these wild fat steers and killed 60 of 'em.

"Still the cattlemen refused to take their cattle away. We knew we was goin' to starve if things kept up, so we killed 60 more..

"It made quite a pile, an' the smell should a driven 'em away if nothin' else did. But all the killin' did no good. Then it was a case of the settlers or the cattlemen, so our men folks masked their faces an' threatened the owners instead o' the cattle. That did the trick. 'bout six months later the cattlemen returned to arrest those who threatened 'em, but no amount of money could loosen a tongue, an' we had no more trouble with 'em " (Knight 1947:2-3).

Molly hadn't really felt carrying a gun was necessary when she and Charlie first settled in Long Valley. But after the men had headed out to work in the mines, Molly changed her mind.

One morning while Molly finished her baking she laid the baby on a quilt in the front yard. Every few seconds she would glance out the kitchen window to see if the baby was staying on the blanket. Turning back from the cupboard, Molly looked out to see a wolverine sniffing its way towards the baby. Dropping the pan in her hand she raced out the door, snatching up the infant, then heading for the cabin. She laid the baby in its bed, grabbed up the rifle and headed out after the animal. The wolverine ran towards the creek as Molly fired, and missed. Never again would Molly leave the house without a gun. She became an excellent marksman, refusing to stay home when a hunt was planned.

Molly's outdoor skills also included fishing to supplement their diet. She didn't just settle for putting a grasshopper on a hook, but studied the eating habits of various fish, tying flies to mimic the insects the fish were biting. She loved to tell the story of a salmon she caught.

"I'm minded o' the time the little one an' I went fishin' in Boulder Creek. We had caught twelve nice trout and' had just crossed a ridge where the river turned, an' as I looked down the creek I saw a big salmon comin' my way. I run him into shallow water an' he swam towards the bank. I come up on him easy like, an' with one hand on each side o' his body, I moved my fingers along his sides, closer and closer, then quick as a flash run my thumbs in his gills. His mouth opened an' I quick clamped my fingers in his mouth. He thrashed' bout so much I could hardly stay on my feet.

" 'O Mommy, see him kick', my little girl hollered.

"There weren't a dry spot on me when I finally landed him on the bank. Comin' home through the deep grassy meadow we came across a wild duck on the nest. When she flew away, I broke one of the eggs an' found it good, so we took a dozen eggs besides the trout and salmon. We was right proud o' ourselves that day" (Knight 1947:4-5).

Molly and Charlie Willey were married for nineteen years, then in 1907 they divorced. A year later Molly married Bill Kesler. The newlyweds moved to Knox, about twenty-five miles east of Cascade. Bill built Molly a small cabin and she hired on to feed twenty-or-so shepherders working in the valley.

Molly hunted and fished to supply food for the table along with doing the cooking. Spring was the time she baited bear traps, for bear grease ran out by spring. "Pies just ain't fit to eat," according to Molly, "'les they're made o' bear grease. But you must make sure they's been fattened on huckleberries, 'cause if a bear's eatin' fish, his flesh tastes fishy. Don't never try makin' pie crust out anything 'cept bear grease, taint fit to eat" (Knight 1947:5).

Her skill with a rifle was excellent. One evening after the men had finished eating and were resting outside on the porch, three buck deer wandered up the trail. Everyone scurried for their rifles. Molly was the last to shoot, picking off two of the three animals. As the smoke cleared, and the men realized what had happened, they threw down their guns and stalked off in grim silence. Undaunted, Molly cleaned and skinned her kill. There would be deer steak for breakfast.

Molly had a second, gentler occupation in the mountains. For twenty years she was the only doctor in the valley. Traveling over the trails both winter and summer, she delivered babies and nursed the sick and aged, never charging a penny for her services. In all those years she never lost a mother, and only one abnormal baby. Her logic saved many lives.

"You know in those days we didn't know about such things as blood transfusions, an' there weren't no ergot within a hundred miles, but God O'Mighty did give me a head an' I was aimin' to use it. I decided there was only one way to stop them hemorrhages, an' that was to give her a shock. I had the men folks bring in a tub o' snow an' melt it, then I wrung out sheets out o' that ice cold water an' wrapped 'em 'round.

"You know, women can pick the most god-awful times to have their youngins'. Why I've seen 'em deliberately wait fer a blizzard or until the water was high and the bridge out. Then again I've seen 'em when they wouldn't wait to finish sneezin'.

"Now take the time little Dove Eye Taylor made her first landin'," Molly reflected as she put a piece of wood on the fire. "How Mrs. Taylor did want a boy, but all her boys were girls. Well, it was a 10 mile trek across to Taylors, an' the snow was least three feet deep and so soft my skis sunk in a foot, but I made it there.

"After we got little Dove Eye all tied and dried, an' her Mother restin' easy like, I started fer home. When I'd gone about two miles there come one awful blizzard. I couldn't see ten feet ahead. The wind lashed the snow against my face, an' near blinded me. My legs was just as heavy as fence posts, but stumblin' round, I found I had reached an old washed out bridge that crossed Lake Fork, and bein' as how I couldn't go back the way I came, I started across on the stringers of the ol' bridge.

"I laid one ski from one stringer to 'nother, stood on it, then reached back and picked up the first one an' stepped on it, then laid it in front again. When I finally got across, the snow had drifted ten feet deep over the end of the stringers, so I couldn't climb out. I let myself down through the stringers to the edge of the ice below an' followed the river until I could find a place to climb out.

"Feelin' my way along, with the blizzard whippin' and lashin' at me from all directions, I knowed I must give up. I took off one o' my skis and started to dig a hole in the snowbank to await my fate. Lookin' up sudden-like I saw I could climb out.

"You know," Molly reflected with a shining light in her eyes, "heaven ain't ever far away. The next five minutes proved it. I stumbled right to it's door. It happened to be Mrs. Routsella's door too, an' she thawed me out with hot coffee and cake" (Knight 1947:3-4).

Molly did some rescuing of her own after she and Bill moved over to Warm Lake. Buying a large piece of land next to the lake, they built and ran the Warm Lake Hotel in the pines. The place became a favorite stopping spot for hunters, fishermen, and folks just wanting to spend some time in the mountains. For almost thirty years travelers relaxed next to the fire, and ate Molly's cooking. Molly still found time to hunt and fish, supplying wild game and huckleberry pie for her guests.

But it was in the winter of 1935 when Molly saved the airliner. A blizzard raged over the mountains of Central Idaho on the evening of March 25, 1935. Molly and Bill Kesler were settling down for the night when Molly heard the sound of a plane's engine over the roar of the wind. The Cascade News reported:

After battling for over three hours against the furious storm which whipped it off its course, the Salt Lake-to-Portland giant airliner of the United Airlines landed safely at Cascade at midnight Monday during a lull in the storm with its gasoline supply nearly exhausted and its nine occupants nearly frozen, the heating apparatus having failed.

The lost ship was first located by Mrs. Mollie Kessler, high over Warm Lake. Knowing something was wrong she phoned to Cascade and Earl Welch and Dr. Theil gave the Boise office its location. It was then put on its proper course by radio (3/26/1935:p.1).

United Airline officials were so grateful for Molly's help they sent her a lifetime pass. In 1947 Molly remarked, "I ain't never used it yet, but don't get the idea I'm scared, fer I'm not, but I just ain't had no 'cassion to use it" (Knight 1947:9).

After thirty years at Warm Lake Hotel, Molly and Bill decided to "move to town." In the late 1940's they moved to McCall, next to the lake, but Molly couldn't leave her mountain way of life totally behind. When interviewed by Ruth Knight in 1947, Molly opened the closet door; two worn-out 30-30 rifles leaned against the wall. A .38 lay under her pillow.

"I know you think I'm crazy, but beings as how I had to depend on a gun so long, I just can't get used to bein' without it, no more'n I can get used to these electric lights. I wanted to stay there in those hills. Yes, I wanted to die there, fer thats home to me" (Knight 1947:1).

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

Molly's life story was recorded in 1947 by Ruth T. Knight, under the title, Molly Of The Mountains. After finding the unpublished manuscript in the historic files of the Payette National Forest, McCall, Idaho, I realized Molly's story was unique and inspirational. So few stories tell of the early life of Idaho pioneer women. I re-wrote the information gathered by Knight in story form, using the facts as a base format and quotes of dialogue taken by Knight from Molly at the time of the 1947 interview. I have added generally to the scenes of that data, and corrected punctuation; striving to maintain Molly's charm and individuality. I researched and checked data in the Cascade News (Cascade, Idaho, Friday March 29, 1935, p.1) and Idaho Daily Statesman (Boise, Idaho, Tuesday Morning, March 26, 1935, p.1 and 2), for details regarding the rescue of the United Airlines plane.

**FRONT PHOTO:** unidentified pioneer mother and baby.