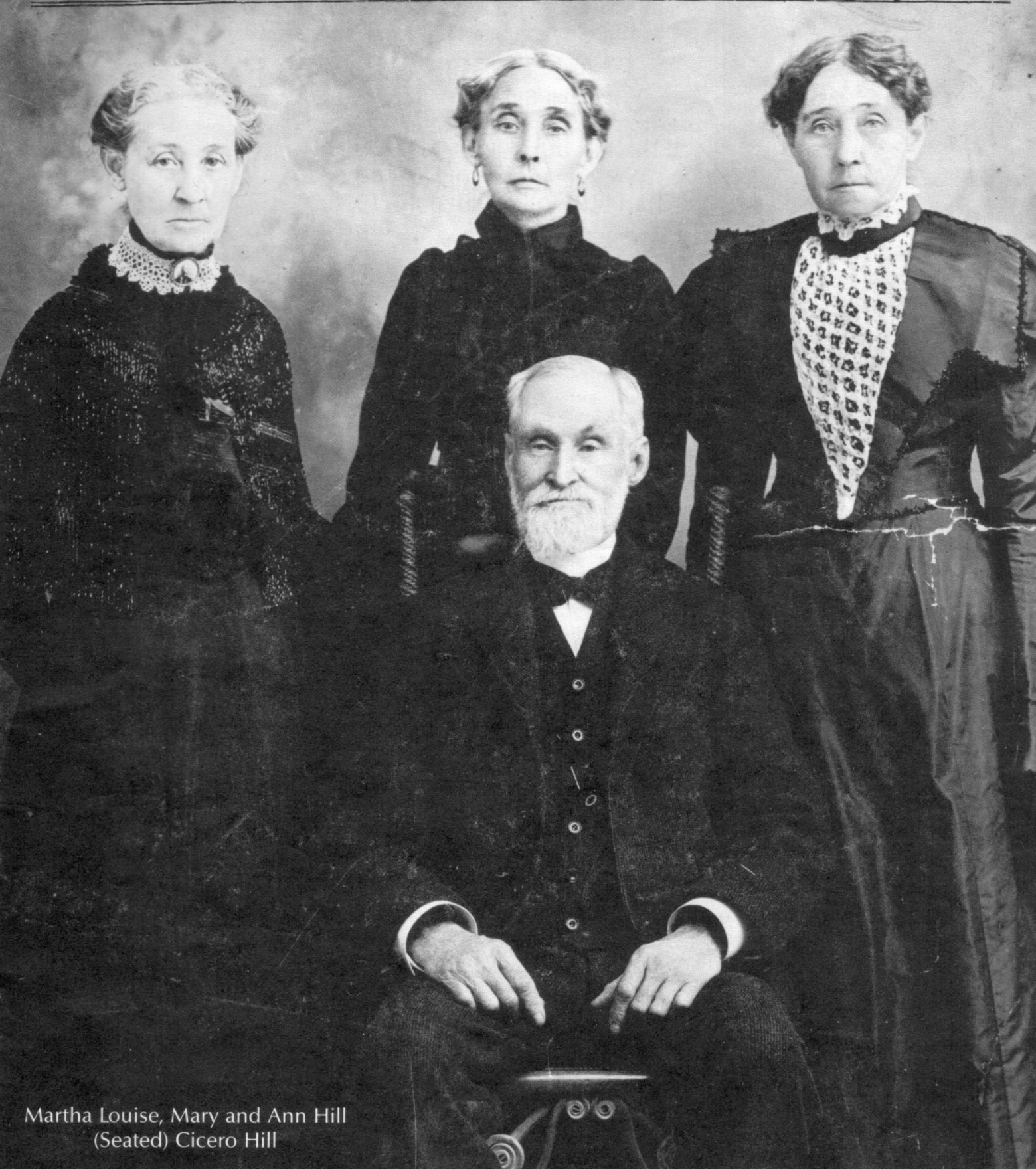
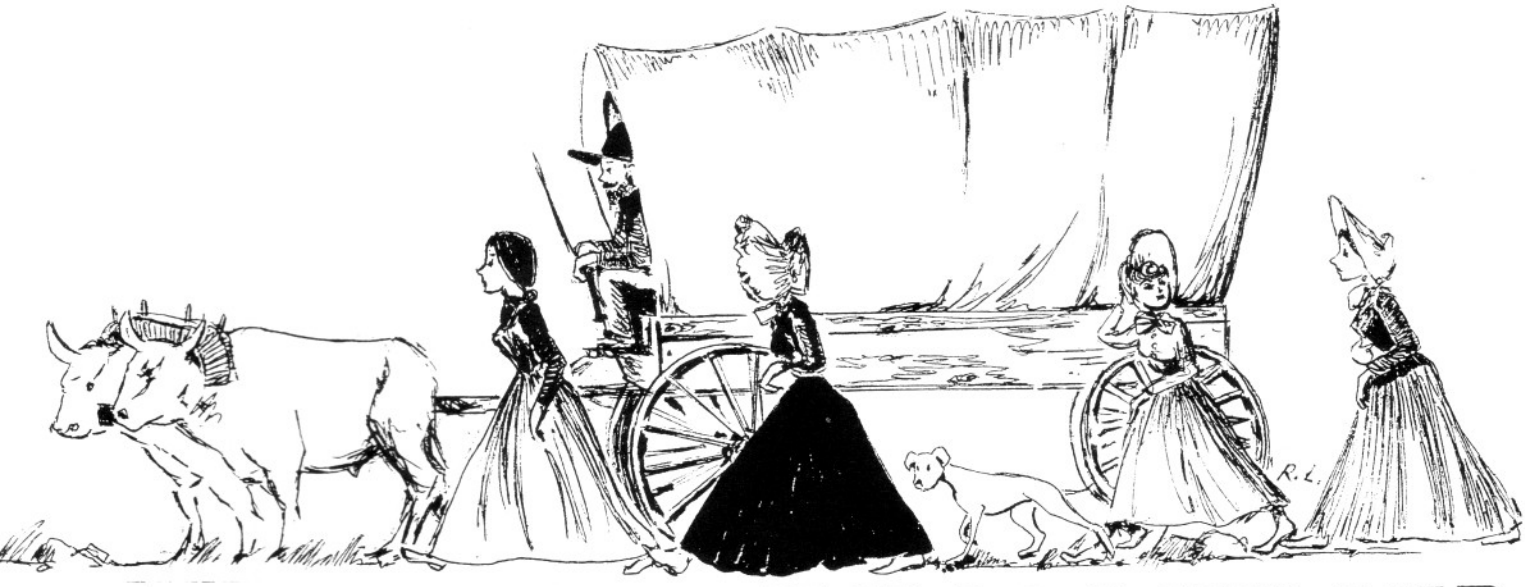
THE TABLE ROCK SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTHERN OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Martha Louise, Mary and Ann Hill
(Seated) Cicero Hill



THE HILL FAMILY OF ASHLAND

by Nan Hannon*

South of Ashland, past the cut-off to Emigrant Lake, a white sign marked "Cemetery" points up a gravel road. At the top of the hill, overlooking the Emigrant Lake Reservoir, is a two-acre cemetery known as the Hill-Dunn Cemetery. Golden star thistles grow between the markers, which date back to 1853.

Isaac and Elizabeth Hill are buried here, in a family plot planted with iris. They took up a Donation Land Claim south of Ashland in 1853. Elizabeth and her daughters were the first white women to settle in the south end of the Bear Creek Valley.

The Hill sisters lived long lives, and left detailed memoirs of the settlement of the frontier. This first part of a two-part series recounts the Hills' journey to Oregon and their arrival in the Bear Creek Valley as the Indian Wars are about to begin.

The Hills came to Oregon from the Sweetwater Valley in Tennessee, a broad fertile valley where the Sweetwater Creek flows between the Cumberlands and the Great Smokey Mountains. They lived in a house on a bluff overlooking a creek, where Elizabeth's parents had arrived in a covered wagon in 1816, to settle the Hiwassee Purchase. Pioneer blood flowed in their veins, and the Hills were proud to claim kinship with Robert E. Lee, and with ancestors who had fought in the American Revolution, the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War.

Isaac and Elizabeth Hill had six children. Their three daughters were Martha, Mary and Ann Hasseltine, called "Hasse." The girls were all less than a hundred pounds. The sons were La Grande, a wild and robust young man almost six feet tall who loved to hunt; John, the middle son, reserved and gentle like his mother, and

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a good farmer; and Cicero, the youngest brother, a pleasant, reliable boy more outgoing than John, but without La Grande's hunger for adventure.

Hasse remembered that neither of her parents could be called handsome. Isaac was fair and blue-eyed, and his fine baritone voice supported the hymn-singers at the deep water Baptist services the family attended. Elizabeth, called "Betsy" by her husband, was a dark woman. She was tall, and held herself very straight, always dignified and ladylike.

The Hills were prosperous farmers who raised cotton, flax, corn and cattle. The girls remembered a happy life in Tennessee, gathering wild plums and hickory nuts, attending quilting bees and husking parties. Once a year a shoemaker, who took his pay in smoked hams, visited to make each family member two pairs of shoes, one for good and one for everyday. The girls each had two new woolen dresses a year.

Despite the pleasant and secure life the Hills enjoyed in Tennessee, Isaac was not content. He may have been uneasy about the social and economic problems in the South which would lead to the Civil War. He also had a restless nature, which would take him twice across the American continent, into gold fields and Indian wars, well after his fortieth birthday.

While the Hill girls were young, their father made two unsuccessful homesteading attempts in Missouri and one in Alabama. Elizabeth and her younger children were staying at her father's home, while Isaac and La Grande worked on a homestead cabin in Missouri, when word of the gold strike in California reached the South, in the spring of 1850.

Isaac sold his half-completed home, his tools and his stock at a loss in order to hurry to California. La Grande accompanied him, and Betsy and the other Hill children stayed at her father's, with John managing the farm. Isaac's sixty-six year old mother, intrepid Elizabeth Lane Hill, also joined the westward party, as did three of Iaaac's brothers, and his sister Maria Louise Kelly, her husband, and son Isham Keith.

The party took an overland route which brought them to the Willamette Valley in the late fall of 1850. The Kellys headed south for the gold fields. Winter snows stopped them not far south of the Siskiyou Pass, near a mountain the Indians called Wy-ek-a, which we call Mt. Shasta. While the rest of their relatives stayed in the Willamette Valley, Isaac and La Grande wintered near Astoria, where they built a sawmill on the Columbia.

Isaac seems to have thought about staying with the sawmill, but word of gold strikes near the Kelly's at Wy-ek-a (now Yreka) drew him south. He left La Grande at the Clatsop settlement, and with his brothers, William and George, travelled south.

Isaac, ever alert for opportunity, was on the look-out for attractive land as the brothers journeyed. The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 allowed for free land to settlers in the Oregon Territory, and Isaac was interested. The brothers camped one night in the Bear Creek Valley, a little south of present-day Ashland. On that spring night in 1851, Isaac found what he had been looking for: land covered with spring-green grass and wildflowers, groves of oak and madrone, all sheltered by the rugged Siskiyou Mountains. Isaac told his brothers that he was going to return to this spot.

In Yreka, the brothers were happily reunited with their sister Maria Louise and their nephew Isham Keith. Maria was an energetic little woman who carried her sheet metal stove and a supply of dried apples to California, and began making and selling dried apple pies as soon as she arrived. The first white woman in Yreka, she was beloved by the miners not only for her cooking, but for her kindly nursing and good spirits. She operated an open-air restaurant and a boarding house, and enjoyed feeding the miners starved for good cooking and feminine company. Her son Isham, the apple of her eye, was also well-liked in the mining town. The sixteen year old Tennessee mountain boy was a skilled woodsman, tracker and hunter. He brought home to his mother many a deer shot cleanly through the eye.

The Hill brothers began mining on Humbug Creek, ten miles northwest of town. The creek had been called a "humbug" by disgusted miners who found nothing there, but the Hills and the Kellys did well. Isaac took out at least $50 in gold each day, and Isham once found a nugget worth $480. At Humbug Creek, and on Greenhorn Creek closer to Yreka, the

Martha Louise, Mary and Anne Hasseltine Hill

Hill men found a fortune in the gravelled stream beds.

In the spring of 1851, the Hill brothers decided to leave the gold fields. Isaac returned to the east in the fall of 1851, with $23,000 in gold sewn in the lining of his vest. He took 90 pounds of gold to the St. Louis mint to be coined.

$23,000 was sufficient capital to enable a man to live comfortably for the rest of his days in Sweetwater, Tennessee. But Isaac's thirst for adventure was unslaked, even after his journey back and forth across the continent. He was going to take his family back West, to the beautiful spot in the Bear Creek Valley.

Cicero, John and the Hill women were overjoyed to be reunited with Isaac and with his plan to take them there. His Betsy, a forty-five year old woman who would have been well-content to live and die on her father's farm, was dismayed by Isaac's plan, but maintained a "Spartan silence," according to the girls. Hasse's granddaughter Margaret Joy, lives in Ashland, and says, "It would never have occurred to great-grandmother not to come with her husband...he had a vision of what this country could and would be. And all she could do as his wife was go along with his vision whether she had it or not."

That winter was spent preparing for the journey. Isaac, acquainted with the demands of the frontier, knew what he needed and wanted. On the way home to Tennessee, he had ordered new rifles and a chest full of medicines. He had also commissioned the construction of two wagons, one with a flat bottom for crossing rivers. At home, he and Cicero and John built boxes of white poplar exactly fitted to the wagon beds.

Betsy and the girls sewed canvas sacks to hold their possessions, and dried enough apples and peaches to fill four huge sacks. "These may be the last apples you'll ever see," Betsy murmured to the girls as she set the fruit out in the sun.

She and the girls also sewed sunbonnets, aprons, durable dresses, and knitted stockings and socks. Often this work was done in the evenings, while Isaac entertained

visitors who wanted to hear tales of Orégon.

In the last weeks of January, 1852, everything the Hills owned was either packed or given away, and the girls finally realized that they were really leaving home. They had been forbidden by their father to take any books but the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*, but Mary sneaked in her copy of Kirkham's *Grammar*, possibly because of Betsy's laments that her girls would never see another schoolhouse.

After leaving Sweetwater, the Hills travelled rather leisurely to Keokuk, Iowa, where they stayed with relatives while Isaac made final preparations for the journey. About 75 others joined the Hills in Keokuk. Isaac was a very persuasive advocate of Oregon's charms, and a number of relatives and friends had decided to follow him, happy to have an experienced guide.

While the Hill women sewed the wagon covers, Isaac and the boys purchased stock. Isaac's dream was to run a cattle ranch, and he bought over a hundred head of cattle, oxen to pull the family's three wagons, and some fine horses. One of the horses he gave to Martha, who named the pretty mare Kate. Kate was to be her confidante on the trip, and into Kate's ear Martha whispered her homesickness and fears.

Martha confessed in her memoirs that the girls were snobs who considered the rest of the wagon train beneath them, and recalls that she never spoke to her father's hired men. Part of the girls' aloofness stemmed from a natural reticence, and part from Betsy's training. Martha explained that the girls had been brought up to speak only to people to whom they had been properly introduced.

When the Hills left Keokuk, many tears were shed, both by those going and those staying behind. Perhaps the saddest tears of all were wept by young Hasse, who cried behind a shed because no one remembered that the date was also her 14th birthday.

The first days of the journey west were an adjustment to life on the trail. The men learned to wield the seven-foot whips that drove the oxen forward. The girls decided that the hired men were too wasteful and dirty to handle the food, so they divided the cooking chores among themselves. Betsy took her place at the front of one of the Hills' wagons, where she sat on a cushion, with what Hasse called her "box of trinkets" near at hand. The box contained, among other things, a carefully-packed china cup, for Betsy declared she could not drink out of a tin mug. The family tradition that she dined with china and crystal and linen napkins throughout the journey may be exaggerated, but it results perhaps from her grandchildren's memories of Elizabeth as a "refining influence" on their childhood. After Issac's death she lived with Mary, and then with Hasse, watchful of their children's manners. The girls never forgot that other women on the wagon train exclaimed that Elizabeth Hill always "looked as though she had just stepped out of a bandbox" even to the clean handkerchief tucked in her belt.

When the Hills reached the Missouri River in May, they discovered that 1852 was a year of great migration. Confusion and excitement reigned at the river crossing. Isaac was alarmed by the number of other emigrants, who might beat him to his chosen claim-site. His sense of urgency was shared by other pioneers who wanted to get the best land. Isaac had already made reservations at the ferry, and when he tried to push his party ahead of others, one man threatened to kill him. In this atmosphere of haste and violence, it was not surprising that tragedy would result.

Only three flat-bottomed rowboats were available for settlers, wagons and cattle. On May 10, most of the Hill party crossed. On the 11th, around noontime, John Hill persuaded the last of the cattle onto a raft. He had already gone back and forth several times, and like the other men, he was hungry and tired. When he pushed off, several men left on the bank, anxious for their dinner on the other side of the river, jumped onto the already overloaded boat. The milling of the frightened cattle capsized the raft. Animals and men struggled in the muddy current. John's family called to him to cling to the raft, as he could not swim. Ropes were thrown to the floundering men. All were saved except young John Hill, who was swept out of sight.

Men went downriver to search for the body; searchers with lanterns combed the

the riverbank throughout the night, but John was not found.

Elizabeth Hill had raised all of her six children nearly to adulthood. The sudden loss of her youngest son overwhelmed her. She withdrew. For four days she took no food. The journal in which she had written faithfully since leaving Tennessee remained blank. On the fourth night, Hasse persuaded her to eat a biscuit and drink a cup of water.

In the darkness, the sound of a fiddle came from another wagon encampment. The plaintive strings voiced the grief in the mother's heart. For the rest of her life, Betsy couldn't bear to hear the sound of a fiddle. She would quietly absent herself from any musical event.

No less grieved, Isaac still felt the urgency of pressing onward. He left an address at the ferry, and sent notices to Iowa newspapers, asking to be notified if the body was found. Over a year later, in Oregon, the family received word that John's body had washed ashore twenty miles downstream from the ford.

Martha reported that after leaving the Missouri River the family travelled through Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho and into Oregon without seeing another white person or another house. Betsy, who feared for the lives of the rest of the family, suffered from terrible headaches as the wagons toiled up the Platte River, and when cholera broke out along the river, she was the first of the party to become ill.

Isaac's chest of medicines probably saved many lives. When Betsy fell ill, he nursed her himself, refusing to let the other children near her. He told the girls that with cholera "you either get well or die within a few days." Betsy recovered, but many others died. Along the trail, the Hill party came upon a man burying his young wife. He offered the Hill girls her clothes, but Isaac forbid them to touch them, for fear of their becoming ill, too.

Descending the Rockies, Martha experienced another tragedy. Her beloved horse, Kate, was bitten by a scorpion and had to be shot, in a canyon called Scorpion Gulch. Martha's misery was compounded by a lack of water, for the wagon train passed through many drought-stricken areas, and the party had to do without fresh water, and the thirsty cattle had to be driven day and night from river to river.

At Umatilla, the girls were surprised to see a strange man coming up to them. The strange man turned out to be their brother La Grande. They had not seen him for three years, and La Grande had grown a beard. The presence of La Grande heartened the Hills, who felt they must be getting close to their new home.

The Hills wintered at Salem, where Isaac and Hasse spent most of the months in bed, recovering from malaria. The winter of 1852-1853 was a hard one, and Isaac lost a large portion of his stock in the storms. As soon as the snows melted, Isaac was ready to leave, and Betsy was equally eager to be settled in a home of her own again.

Before leaving Salem, the Hills bought a year's supply of provisions. Betsy bought things for her new house, including a bolt of calico with which to curtain off the beds in the one-room cabin Isaac and Cicero planned to build.

The Hills went as far as Cow Creek Canyon, near Canyonville, where Elizabeth and the girls stayed at a hotel, while Isaac, Cicero and the hired men went ahead. Isaac wanted to stake his claim, get his cattle settled, and start a cabin.

But when Isaac and Cicero arrived in the Bear Creek Valley, they discovered that the land on which Isaac had camped in 1851 had already been claimed by Patrick Dunn and Fred Alberding. So Isaac Hill staked out land a few miles south, and with Cicero's help began work on a garden and a cabin, on land that was not his dreamed-of acreage.

Patrick Dunn, who would become Isaac's son-in-law less than a year later, had filed a Donation Land Claim on 160 acres on what is now Hwy, 66. Twenty-nine years old that spring of 1853, Patrick had already had more than his share of adventures. Born in Ireland, he had emigrated to America with his parents at the age of four. He grew up in Philadelphia, and was working as a bookkeeper at an Illinois flour mill when stricken with gold fever. He travelled to California by mule team and arrived in Sacramento on August 9, 1850. He met and became partners with Fred Alberding, and the two travelled northward following the streams and the rumors of gold.

The hard winter of 1850-1851 found Dunn

and Alberding in a camp along the Salmon River, where a number of miners were snowed-in and cut off from supplies for weeks. The miners killed a skinny mule and ate it; they went hungry after that.

At 26-year old miner named Abel Helman, who had no luck at all in the gold fields, was also at the Salmon River camp that hard winter. Helman, who would become one of Ashland's first citizens, wrote in his diary for March 23, 1851: "Salmon Creek, California...I think that if I ever get home, California will never see me again. I never wished myself home until I started on this trip, and since that, I have wished me there more than 20 times." Helman's homesickness was surely shared by his fellow miners; but when thaw came, they once again took up the search for wealth.

Helman's diary for April 18 records exorbitant prices for necessities. The miners bought what they could and set out. Helman passed through the Rogue Valley on his way to the Willamette Valley, and then returned to a spot on Ashland Creek that looked to him like a likely site for a mill. Dunn and Alberding contrived snowshoes and travelled to Yreka, and then crossed the Siskiyous and entered the Bear Creek Valley. The partners camped at the same spot where Isaac Hill and his brothers had camped a year earlier. The wildflowers and green grass also appealed to Dunn. He thought of filing on the land, but he was not yet ready to give up his hope of quick riches. He and Alberding tried their hand at mining in rough-and-tumble Jacksonville with some success. On one day Dunn took a thousand dollars worth of gold out of a stream. But that luck did not continue, and eventually he and Alberding returned to the spot along present-day Neil Creek, and paced out a claim.

Isaac's other close neighbors were the four Mountain House boys. These young packers were hauling lumber with ox teams to their two sections of land at the foot of the Siskiyous, where they were building the first "Tavern" in Jackson County south of Jacksonville. The Mountain House which they raised still stands on Old Hwy. 99, just south of Hwy. 66 to Klamath Falls. It served for many years as a stopping place for travellers and stages going between Oregon and California and Ashland and Klamath Falls.

The partners in the Mountain House were Hugh Barron, John Gibbs, Terry Hare and James Russell. Russell would become another of Isaac's sons-in-law. He had abandoned his trade of stone-cutting in 1849 to come west with a mule train from Pittsburgh.

A few other miners and ferrymen lived in the Bear Creek Valley in that early spring of 1853, but Isaac was among the first wave of settlers coming to farm the land, and the wife and daughters he would bring were the first women to settle in the south end of the valley, on land now covered by Emigrant Lake.

Isaac left Cicero to finish the cabin while he returned to Canyonville for the rest of his family. The journey over the mountains and swollen streams between Canyonville and the Rogue Valley proved to be the most difficult part of the Hills' westward odyssey, but on April 14, 1853, they arrived at their new home just south of Ashland.

It was Hasse's 15th birthday. She had wept on her 14th birthday, leaving Keokuk, and she wept on this birthday, again hiding her tears from her family. Indeed, each of the Hill women found a private spot in the woods to cry a little over the primitive home to which Isaac had brought them: a floorless cabin with holes for windows. Hasse cried also because she thought she would never again see a red apple or a schoolhouse, but she swallowed her tears as quickly as she could, and went in to her mother.

Betsy, who had at least tried to maintain her "Spartan silence" during the year since she had left civilization, was ill with grief at the thought of raising her three daughters in this wilderness. The girls laid the feather bolster from the wagon on the floor for their mother, and tried to cheer her up. They could speak with genuine enthusiasm of the loveliness of their new home. In her memoirs, Martha wrote that "When we came to the Rogue River Valley, it seemed to our eyes beautiful indeed, and compared to most of the lands we had traveled through, and we did not blame our father for losing his heart to the place."

The girls gathered wildflowers for their mother, and began setting up the cabin as a home. When Betsy's illness

passed, she helped them, keeping to herself her continuing uneasiness about life in such an isolated spot.

Elizabeth's dismay was compounded by her fear of the Indians living less than a mile away. The family had passed through at least one "rancharee"or Indian village along Bear Creek, where naked Indian children ran up to see the horses, and the Indian women held up their babies to see the white women.

Scarcely five years after the Hills' ride through their village, those Indian women and children would be dead or herded into a reservation at Siletz on the Oregon coast, where the last members of the tribe would perish. Elizabeth may have forseen the coming confrontation between the Indians and the settlers, and the tragedy it would bring to her own family.

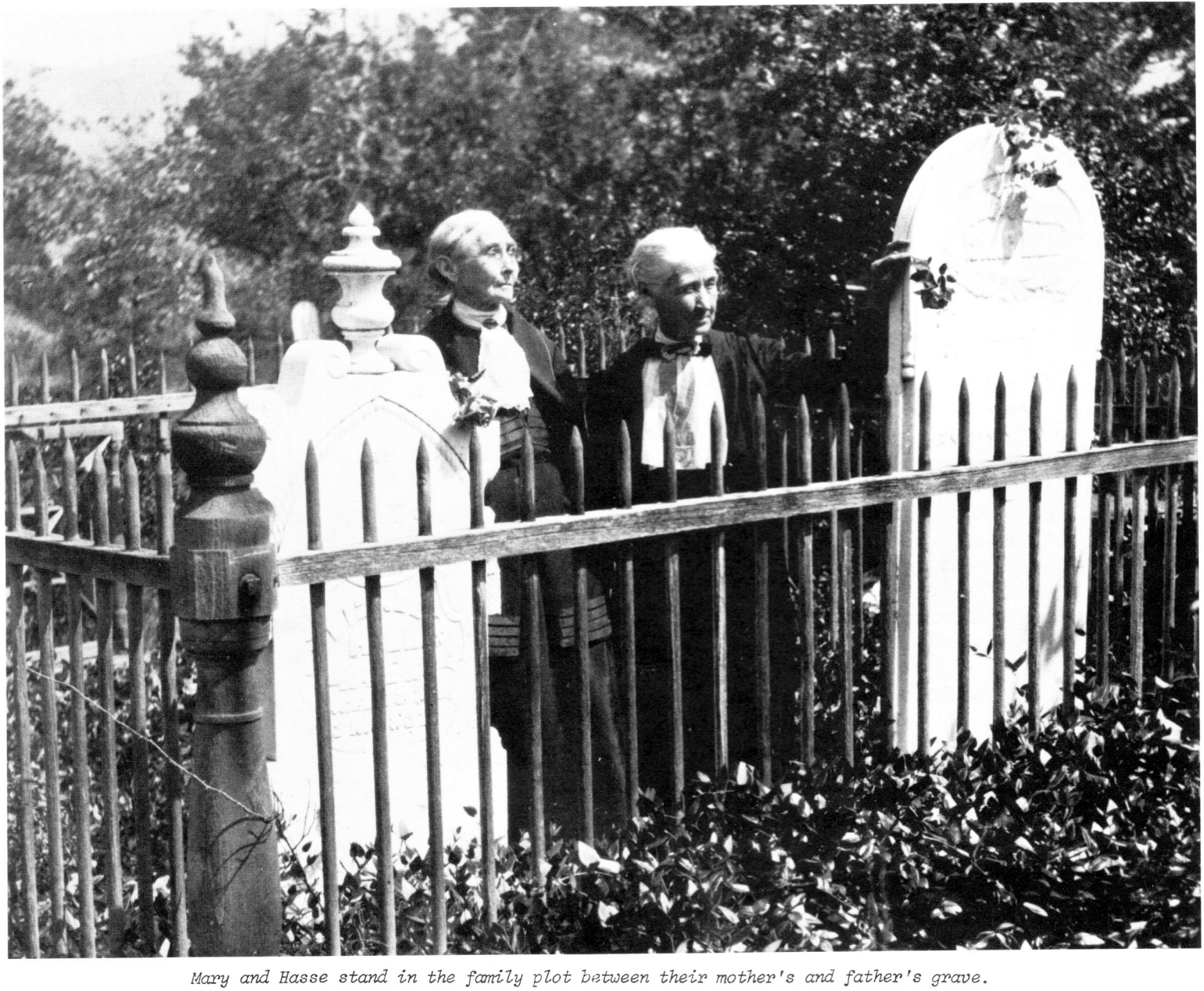
The settlers lumped together the Indians living in the Rogue Valley as the "Rogue Indians," although the Indians living in small villages along the tributaries of the Rogue River represented at least three different tribal groups speaking distinct languages. The white settlers believed the "Rogues" to be fierce and untrustworthy. Their savage reputation discouraged all but the most dauntless pioneers.

Ann Hasseltine, Mary, and Martha Louise in later years.

Many of those who did come to the Rogue Valley were forthright about their intention of eliminating the Indians and claiming the land they felt was theirs by Manifest Destiny. Even one of the missionaries who came to save the Indians' souls wrote that "...the doom of extinction is suspended over this wretched race and...the hand of providence is removing them to give place to a people more worthy of this beautiful and fertile country."

Charles G. Pickett, who was Oregon's first Indian agent, wrote in the *Oregon Spectator* in 1847: "self-preservation here dictates these savages be killed off as soon as possible." Nine months before the Hill women arrived in the Bear Creek Valley, in July of 1852, the white signers of a treaty with the Indians at Table Rock were toasted at a dinner party with the wish that "you may live to see the time when the Indians of Rogue River are extinct."

The Indians living closest to the Hills were probably Shasta Indians. At one time, a few Shasta had ventured over the Siskiyous from the tribe's home grounds along the Klamath River in Northern California; now about 300 Shasta lived in extended family groups along Bear Creek and its tributaries.



Mary and Hasse stand in the family plot between their mother's and father's grave.

Encounters between the Shasta and the white explorers, trappers and packers were sometimes hostile and sometimes friendly. The Shasta resented intrusions into their territory, but the whites passing through were more of a curiosity than a threat.

This situation changed when miners and settlers began making permanent homes. While the Bear Creek Valley could support a large agricultural population intensively farming and ranching the lowland areas, a far more limited number of hunter-gatherers such as the Shastas could be sustained by the same land.

The Shasta depended for their existence on game such as elk, deer, antelope and bear hunted by the men; roots, plants, and fruit gathered by the women; and most important, on the dog salmon caught in the streams, and acorns gathered on the wooded slopes of the hills.

The arrival of miners in the Jackson Creek goldrush of 1852, and the farmers who followed them, immediately disrupted the food supply for the Indians living in the Rogue Valley. The whites competed for game and scared the animals into the mountains. Worse, the miners muddied and fouled the streams with their gold operations, killing the fish. The settlers released pigs to forage for acorns in the oak groves. By the winter of 1852, the Indians were beginning to go hungry.

When the Hill women rode through the village in the spring of 1852, they were not only a wonder to the Shasta, but a sign to the Indians that the settlers meant to stay, to multiply, to render the earth unlivable for them.

As Betsy Hill and her petite daughters put up calico curtains in their tiny cabin, the Shasta prepared for war.

To be concluded in the next issue