

Pioneer Memories of the Santa Ana Valley

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Robert James and Amanda Jane Blee

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AMANDA JANE HARMON

PIONEER

1849 - 1940

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WESTWARD TO CALIFORNIA VIA THE
OVERLAND ROUTE

In early 1852, Luther and Martha Harmon, with children Henry (14), John (11) and Amanda Jane (3), left their home in Grand Rapids, Michigan, bound for California. They sought gold, and they looked forward to a better life as promised by the great American Dream.

First they took a steamer across Lake Michigan to Chicago, then a canal boat to La Salle, Illinois. From there a river steamboat carried them down the Illinois River to St. Louis, last outpost of civilization on the western frontier.

At St. Louis, Luther Harmon bought a covered wagon and a team of mules to transport his family and their belongings the remaining 2,000 miles to their ultimate destination: Sacramento, with its nearby goldfields surrounding Sutter's Mill on the American River.

The Harmon outfit was loaded on a paddlewheel steamer and taken up the Missouri River to Weston, six miles above Ft. Leavenworth. From Weston, around mid-April of 1852, the start overland was made in company with another family with a similar outfit.

The route of the Harmons from St. Louis to California was the same taken by hundreds of thousands of other emigrants from 1844 to 1869. Although known to most later historians as the "California Trail," many pioneers called it the "Overland Trail."

Little Amanda, or Jane, as she liked to be called, sometimes walked beside the trail, hand-in-hand with her mother. Often she was perched on the high front seat of the wagon next to her father or brothers, as they took turns driving the mules. Jane was a petite but sturdy brunette, with pigtailed and freckles. She was always cheerful, even on the most trying days of the trip, and her steady grey eyes missed no detail of the ever-changing landscape.

Exact dates of the Harmon passage are not known, but the 1200-mile leg of the relatively easy travel from St. Louis to Ft. Hall took most wagons about three months. Many timed the trip so as to reach Independence Rock by the 4th of July, there to join many fellow immigrants in what had become an annual celebration of the event.

Beyond Ft. Hall, the remaining 800 miles of the trail tested the hardiest traveler to the limit of endurance: the ordeal of crossing endless ranges of the rugged Rocky Mountains; the weeks of plodding through loose sand and dust; grinding forward, day after day, in stifling heat with little or no water; nights of vigilance against thieving, sometimes hostile, Indians; the backbreaking toil of hauling heavy wagons over 70 miles of the Sierra Nevada, haunted by fear of heavy snows. All of these trials Luther Harmon and his family endured. Untold thousands of others (about one in every 17) died in the attempt, and were buried along the way.

At one point, most likely while crossing the Rockies, Martha Harmon became desperately ill with what they called "mountain fever." With her death apparently imminent, Luther sent Henry and John along a line of passing wagons to borrow a shovel with which to dig their mother's grave. They promised her they would return later and recover her body. Miraculously, after treatment by a rough traveler calling himself an "herb doctor," Martha recovered.

It was while Martha lay ill in a tent pitched beside the trail that a band of roving Indians appeared; threatening to molest the little party. When one of the savages spied the sick woman, Luther had the presence of mind to deceive him by exclaiming, "Cholera!" By this time, that word was known and feared by all the Indians, because the dreaded disease had ravaged through many tribes all across the continent. Luther's ruse worked, and the intruders hastily departed. Thereafter, as the two emigrant families resumed their journey westward, an Indian escort could be seen riding ahead, apparently warning others to beware of those particular travelers.

By the time the Harmons and their companions reached the "Forty-Mile Desert" near Carson Sink, the mules had become too weak to pull the wagons. Both teams, totaling eight mules, were hitched to one wagon and the other left behind, along with many cherished possessions. The desert was then crossed in one overnight marathon drive.

The cold winds of fall had begun to blow as the little party labored over the last crests and chasms of the Sierra Nevada. Finally, they slogged wearily into Sacramento, their shoes long gone and their clothing in rags. They were totally exhausted, but had triumphed, at last, over one of the epic challenges of history.

AMANDA JANE HARMON STAFFORD BLEE
IN CALIFORNIA, 1852 - 1940

Although only three when she crossed the country Jane carried the vivid memories of that long and dangerous journey throughout her life. The experience doubtless contributed to her strength of character, particularly her resourcefulness, self-reliance and courage in the face of adversity.

Disaster and poverty, resulting from a fire, a flood, a "salted" mining claim and other bad luck, became the fate of the Harmons their first dozen years in California. In such places as La Porte, Mountain Spring, Gatesonville, Poorman's Creek and Petaluma, Luther tried prospecting, running a boarding house, operating a ferry boat and keeping a saloon. He failed in all of these, and in the last named, it was said, because he grew too fond of his wares.

When Jane was 12 her mother died, leaving the girl to keep house for her father and brothers. At 16, having educated herself, she began teaching school. She rode daily to and from the schoolhouse on her pony, through redwood forests where grizzly bears roamed.

In 1870 she married Nelson O. Stafford, a well-to-do but widowed carriage-maker with four children, living in

Petaluma. Jane bore him one son, only to have all five children become her wards at the death of Mr. Stafford in 1878.

By this time, the family had moved to Santa Ana, where Mr. Stafford had previously bought part of a formerly Spanish land grant. There, the widow, both as a public service to augment family income, began to accept school teachers into her home as paying guests. With limited domestic help, Amanda not only cooked meals for her family and boarders, but often rode horseback into the countryside where she shot wild game for the table with her 12-gauge, double-barreled, muzzle-loading shotgun. She had already become Santa Ana's first telegraph operator, with the instruments installed in a corner of her dining room.

In 1882 she married Robert J. Blee, an enterprising young rancher and property-owner in Santa Ana. A daughter and two sons were born of this marriage, but tragedy struck again when the girl died one year after her birth.

Robert Blee prospered, first breeding thoroughbred horses, then growing oranges and walnuts, and later as owner of an insurance business. For 45 years Robert and Jane Blee shared a life of fulfillment and deep attachment, and one of generous public and church service as leading citizens of Orange County, California. Their stately old home on Orange Avenue in Santa Ana was ever a joyful and hospitable place. It was the scene of much love and veneration bestowed on the couple by a constant stream of guests and callers, family and friends: Harmons, Staffords and Bleees, plus countless others of three generations.

Robert Blee died in 1927, leaving his beloved "Jenny," as he called her, a widow for the second time in her life. During her remaining 13 years, one of Mrs. Blee's favorite interests, after her family, friends, church and the exchange of good stories, was college football. Hunched over her radio, she followed the games, play by play, with the enthusiasm of a cheerleader.

Still young in heart and spirit, with pioneer courage to the end, this great lady died in 1940 at the age of 91.



Amanda with Martha
Martha was about 42 when she and her daughter posed for this.

**Sample of Text in Amanda Jane's
Handwritten Journal. (1/2 original size)**

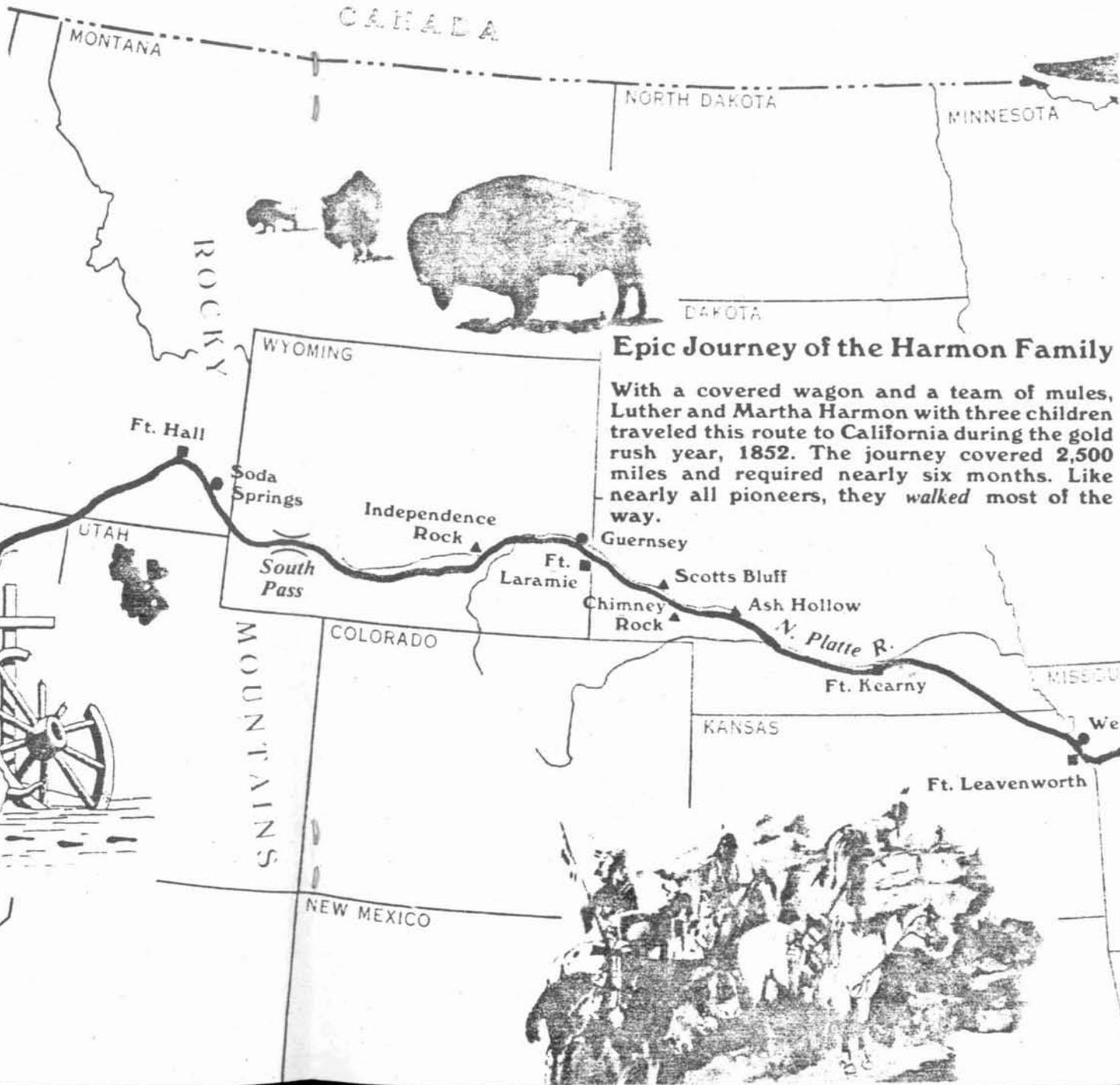
*The route followed the course of the
Platte River across the wide west
plains, passing through St. Kearney
Nebraska, and thence to St. Lawrence
(Mo.) crossing what is now Wyoming
and northern Utah. The Humboldt
river of Nevada was reached and
its course followed to the Nevada
desert which was crossed in the
night, bringing the emigrants*

Amanda Jane Harmon

1849-1940



Amanda Jane Harmon
Circa 1869, Age 20



Epic Journey of the Harmon Family

With a covered wagon and a team of mules, Luther and Martha Harmon with three children traveled this route to California during the gold rush year, 1852. The journey covered 2,500 miles and required nearly six months. Like nearly all pioneers, they *walked* most of the way.

CALIFORNIA
OREGON
NEVADA
IDAHO
SACRAMENTO
CARSON PASS
HUMBOLDT R.
FORTY-MILE DESERT
SANTA ANA
SACRAMENTO

Ft. Hall

Soda Springs

Independence Rock

South Pass

Ft. Laramie

Guernsey

Scotts Bluff

Ash Hollow

Ft. Kearny

Ft. Leavenworth

MISSOURI

ROCKY MOUNTAINS

COLORADO

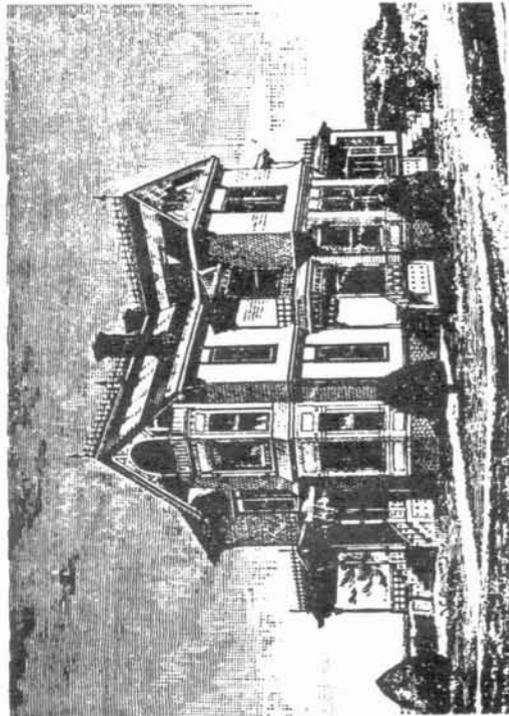
KANSAS

NEW MEXICO

Santa Ana

The Blee Family
Residence

This Victorian-style mansion was built for R. J. Blee in 1887. The house was located at the southeast corner of Orange Avenue and Chestnut Street in Santa Ana. The family lived here until 1902, when they moved to a similar house at 311 Orange Avenue. Both houses were on land originally part of the Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana, bought from Yorba family descendants by Nelson Stafford in 1868, and by Robert J. Blee in 1880.



FAMILY ORIGINS -

Amanda Jane Harmon was born March 16, 1849, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her father, Luther Harmon, was a hatter by trade. Her mother, Martha Hall before marriage, was a teacher who added to her meager salary by sewing hats for Mr. Harmon. The original home of Luther and Martha was in Erie County, New York, at a place called Wales Center, near Aurora. There, sons Henry and John were born.

DATES AND DURATION OF JOURNEY -

The exact dates on which the Harmon family departed Grand Rapids and arrived at Sacramento were apparently not recorded. Based on the documented experience of other emigrant families, it is estimated that the Harmons left Grand Rapids soon after April 1, and arrived Sacramento about October 1, thus traveling continuously under the most trying conditions for nearly six months.

THE OTHER FAMILY -

There is no record of the identity of the other family which, with their own wagon and mules, accompanied the Harmons on the cross-country journey, nor is anything known of their subsequent fate.

THE OVERLAND TRAIL -

The 25-year time-frame from 1844 to 1869, referred to as the period during which "hundreds of thousands of other emigrants" took the Overland Trail to California, is well defined as such by two important events: The year 1844 marked the beginning of wagon travel into northern California over the Sierra Nevada, while 1869 was the year in which the first trans-continental railway was completed, effectively replacing most wagon travel. No precise estimation can be given as to exactly how many people traveled to California via the Overland Trail, but the book, TRAILS WEST, states that, "In the dozen years that began in 1846, more than 165,000 pioneers made the crossing."

ROUTE OF THE HARMONS -

The route followed by the Harmons is well established

in Amanda's own handwritten journal, except for a relatively short segment from South Pass (at the Continental Divide) to the headwaters of the Humboldt River in what is now northeastern Nevada. For that 400 mile stretch, a more southernly alternative, crossing what is now northern Utah north of Great Salt Lake, might have been taken.

HARMONS TOOK CARSON ROUTE OVER SIERRA NEVADA -

Upon reaching the eastern foothills of the Sierra Nevada, six years after the well-publicized Donner tragedy, Luther Harmon chose to cross those rugged mountains via the Carson River route, south of Lake Tahoe, rather than following the Truckee River Route taken by the Donner Party and most others. Not that the former was any easier, for its summit was 9,600 feet above sea level, highest point on any wagon train across the Sierra. (Incidentally, the famous frontiersman, Kit Carson, after whom the route was named, was one of Amanda's heroes, and the subject of fascinating stories she related to children and grandchildren for 70 years.)

BORROWING THE SHOVEL -

A particularly touching incident which occurred earlier during the cross-country trip is recorded in Amanda's journal. Recounting how her two brothers, Henry and John, were sent along the line of wagons to borrow a shovel to dig their mother's grave. Amanda writes, "As they went on their sad mission they vowed they would try in some way to mark the spot, and when they were men they would return and get her precious body." Fortunately, this proved unnecessary.

FIRE AND FLOOD -

The first in a series of misfortunes which overtook the Harmon family almost immediately after their arrival in California was the great Sacramento fire. With every structure in Sacramento built entirely of wood, a vast inferno rapidly engulfed most of the city, forcing the terrified inhabitants to run for their lives. In Amanda's journal the account of the disaster reads as follows: "On the night of Nov. 3rd 1852, my father's birthday, the great fire occurred. We were forced to flee with what we

could carry in our arms, my father and brothers making two trips. We were taken to the courthouse which escaped the fire."

MARTHA TEACHING HER CHILDREN -

A glimpse of Martha Harmon raising her children during those difficult early days in the gold fields at Poorman's Creek is given us by the following lines in Amanda's journal about her mother: "After dinner (on Sundays) she took my younger brother and me and, taking her bible, we spent the remainder of the afternoon in God's beautiful woods listening to her teaching."

AMANDA JANE AS A SCHOOL TEACHER

Since Martha had been a school teacher in Michigan, and because there were no schools in the gold field settlements, Martha must have been the sole educator of her children until her untimely death in 1861, at age 52. Over the next four years, Amanda studied alone to further her education and prepare herself to teach school. When she began doing so at age 16, she was the only teacher in the region, teaching the "three R's" to children of all ages in a rustic, one-room school house.

MR STAFFORD'S PURCHASE OF FORMER LAND GRANT -

After Amanda was grown and had married Nelson Stafford that family moved (in 1873) to Santa Ana, where Mr. Stafford had bought (in 1886) an interest in a tract of land. Up to the date of purchase, the land had been part of the Spanish Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana, owned by Don Antonio Yorba and his descendants by virtue of a land grant dating from 1810, predating all other such land grants in what was later to be named Orange County.

The portion of the rancho bought by Mr. Stafford and two others (Mrs. Fritsch and Tustin) consisted of 1,359 acres cornering at First and Main Streets in Santa Ana. It extended south to McFadden Street, eastward to include what later became the town of Tustin, and it bordered to the east upon Rancho San Joaquin, which later was to become the Irvine Ranch. The land purchase by Mr. Stafford and friends predated by one year the founding of the city of Santa Ana in 1869.

When Mr. Stafford first surveyed the land with a view to purchasing it, mustard grew so high (up to ten feet, and thus higher than the head of a man on horseback) it was necessary to climb a sycamore tree to view the property. From the lofty perch, Mr. Stafford concluded that land that produced that much mustard had to be very fertile. He offered to pay \$4.00 per acre, which offer was promptly accepted.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE YOUNG MOTHER AND WIDOW -

When Amanda Jane married Nelson Stafford in 1870, she was just 21 while he was 42. The oldest of the four living Stafford children (three had died earlier) was Oscar, age 10. The youngest, Carrie, whose own mother had died at that child's birth, was only two. Walter was born to Amanda two years later, and in another six years Nelson was dead at age 50. These facts alone, make it clear that the young mother and widow bore a heavy responsibility. Moreover, in those days a mother and housekeeper had to cook only on a wood stove while serving also as seamstress and laundress for the family. As an example of the other burdens peculiar to life in early California, an all-day round trip to Los Angeles (over 40 miles each way) was made in 1873 by Amanda and 13-year old Oscar, with wagon and team of horses, to procure planed wood flooring for the new family home then abuilding. The additional duties of telegraph operator, which the young mother assumed in 1875, give a further measure of the energy, resourcefulness and grit of this remarkable woman.

ROBERT JAMES BLEE -

Following the death of Nelson Stafford in 1878 the boarders Mrs. Stafford began to accept in her home as paying guests were mainly school teachers whom the widow wished to assist as a contribution in support of public education. Later to join her boarders was Robert James Blee, a native of Pennsylvania who had come to California to seek his fortune. After a sojourn in Santa Paula Mr. Blee arrived in Santa Ana in 1880. In that year he bought from Mrs. Stafford the 36 acres of land cornering at First and Main Streets. The property included the Stafford residence but the family continued to live there with Blee as boarder until he married Mrs. Stafford in 1882.

THOROUGHBRED HORSES -

One of the early business interests of Robert Blee was thoroughbred horses, which the young rancher bought and bred mainly as trotters for racing, a popular sport of the era. During the 1880's and 1890's, Blee owned many famous horses, including Jerry Ladd, May Boy and Prestige, all of which were consistent winners and record-holders on early California tracks. Mr. Blee provided land for, and was part owner of, fair grounds and race track south of Santa Ana. The latter flourished for two decades as "the fastest track in the state."

JENNY BLEE'S INFLUENCE ON "R.J."

In those early years of his marriage, "R.J.," as his friends called him, was fond of good cigars, spirits and betting the horses. "Jenny" Blee always had the upmost respect for the integrity of her "Rob," and she loved him dearly regardless of whatever minor flaws she may have detected in him. But she never approved of such liberal pursuits, because she was a devout Christian with a sterner set of moral principles taught her by her mother. As the years passed, Jenny's influence gradually prevailed. Rob gave up tobacco, liquor and the horses, in favor of becoming a staunch, God-fearing Christian. Eventually he joined his wife as a pillar of the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Ana.

HENRY AND JOHN HARMON

Returning now to the Harmon family, Amanda's two brothers, Henry and John, had moved to southern California at about the same time as their sister. Henry became both a court reporter and a civil engineer in Los Angeles, while John owned a small ranch a few miles southwest of Santa Ana, toward Huntington Beach. Henry died in 1896, while John lived until 1933.

LUTHER HARMON'S FATE -

Among details of family history which remain obscure is the fate of Luther Harmon after 1856, the year in which we know from Walter Stafford's narrative that Luther settled his family permanently in Petaluma after dis-

covering that his mining claim at Poorman's Creek had been salted, and he was destitute. From that time Luther fades entirely from family records until 75 years later, when Amanda Jane leaves us two posthumus references to her father.

First, Amanda is quoted in 1931 as follows: "In 1874 my father brought Muscat grape cuttings from Sonoma County (Petaluma area), and made them into raisins. The raisin industry at one time promised to be one of the leading features of the valley (of Santa Ana), but in 1886 a blight appeared and put an end to that business." Once again, although he was spared knowledge of this failure, poor Luther had tried hard, only to have his efforts frustrated by bad luck.

In the other of Amanda's posthumus references to her father, her handwritten journal of about 1930 contains the following notation: "Luther Norton Harmon - born in Suffield, Ct., Nov. 3d 1808, died in Petaluma, Cal. Dec. 17th, 1879." So ended the life of an unsung hero. And yet, regardless of the paucity of information in family records about Luther's fate in California, it is to be noted that his daughter proudly chose Harmon as the middle name of two of her children.

HERITAGE LEFT BY LUTHER AND MARTHA HARMON -

For both Luther and Martha Harmon, who so eagerly and bravely set out for California in search of a better life for their little family, the great American dream seems never to have become more than a cruelly illusive mirage. But their daring and their sacrifices helped place that dream within the grasp of their children and their children's children. We, their descendants, owe them our everlasting gratitude for the priceless heritage they left us, and especially for giving us Amanda Jane.

"NOBLE PIONEER MOTHER" -

To that strong but gentle lady, Amanda Jane Harmon Stafford Blee, we owe our veneration and love for her example of courage and resolution, and for her unfailing motherly kindness in all circumstances. As Mrs. J.E. Pleasants wrote of her: "she was a noble type of pioneer

motherwho never knew the difference between the children whose care she assumed by marriage, and her own."

MOTHER OF EIGHT

Those who called Amanda Jane "Mother" were:

Born of the marriage of Nelson O. Stafford and Mary N. Pearl	Oscar Nelson Stafford Edgar Neslon Stafford Harry Fritsch Stafford Carrie Wyatt Stafford Flagg
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Born of the marriage of Nelson O. Stafford and Amanda Jane	Walter Alfred Stafford
--	------------------------

Born of the marriage of Robert James Blee and Amanda Jane	Sarah (Sadie) Harmon Blee Harry Harmon Blee James Benton Blee
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SOURCES OF INFORMATION

TRAILS WEST, National Geographic Society
HANDWRITTEN JOURNAL OF AMANDA JANE BLEE, 17 pages
circa 1930
NARRATIVE OF WALTER A STAFFORD, 3 typewritten pages,
date unknown, but obviously post-dating Amanda's
journal, from which it was largely copied.
HISTORY OF ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, Volume I, Mrs.
J.E. Pleasants, 1931 (Chapter XVII of this work was
authored by Mrs. R.J. Blee.)

FOOTNOTE

Amanda Jane, Mrs. R.J.Blee, was a member of the Ebell Society of the Santa Ana Valley. She served on the Board of Directors in 1901-1902; 1902-1905; and 1907-1909.