



MARY WRIGHT EDGERTON

By Pauline Rolfe Archibald

Near the beginning of the nineteenth century many veterans of the Revolutionary War came to settle in the northeastern part of Ohio in the region that afterwards was called the Western Reserve. Among those settlers were Captain John Wright and his two sons, Alpha and Dr. Amos Wright. They bought tracts of land in the little settlement of Tallmadge. There Alpha met Lucy Foster who came from his home state of Connecticut. There they married and raised their large family and on January 21st, 1827 were born twin daughters, Martha and Mary. Alpha Wright was a Puritan by birth and upbringing and doubtless had many of the faults ascribed to the Puritans, but he also had their virtues which were many, despite modern prejudice against them. In him their sternness was leavened by a tolerant and kindly disposition and his household was a happy one. He was fond of reading and was a firm believer in education for boys and girls both, so his children received a better education than was usual in that day.

In those days every home was a factory in itself and every member had his own appointed tasks. Martha and Mary shared in the work of their household. They learned to sew, knit, cook, take care of the sick and to do all the other tasks required of pioneer women. They had sweet voices and both sang in the church choir. They always dressed exactly alike and were often mistaken for one another, much to their delight and they were said to have been very beautiful with ivory complexions, hazel eyes, and brown hair.

The girls attended Oberlin College for some time. Then Martha was married to Homer Carter, a merchant of Tallmadge, and Mary taught school for awhile. Meanwhile a young lawyer, named Sidney Edgerton, had come to nearby Akron. He and Mary were attracted to one another, but their courtship was a stormy one and sounds like an old-fashioned novel. Mary's parents bitterly opposed the match because Sidney was not a church member—a crime in that Puritan community. Mary was heartbroken but met their decision as she usually met trouble—uncomplainingly. However, her health failed rapidly and her parents, becoming greatly alarmed, finally relented and gave their consent.

Mary and Sidney were married in Tallmadge, May 18th, 1849. They proved to be a most devoted couple. Mary's tact and gentle nature smoothed out difficulties and made their home a very pleasant one.

At first they lived in Tallmadge, then moved to Akron where Sidney's law practice was rapidly expanding. Six years later, Sidney bought his father-in-law's farm and they again moved back to Tallmadge where they lived until Sidney was elected to Congress. Meanwhile he drove back and forth the five miles to Akron every day. During Sidney's two terms in Congress, Mary accompanied him to Washington, leaving her children with her relatives.

At the close of Sidney's second term in Congress he was appointed Chief Justice of Idaho Territory and Mary prepared to take her four children on the long trip to Lewiston, the territorial capital. Among the little party were Lucia Darling, a niece of Sidney's who had made their home with them for many years, and Col. W. F. Sanders, a nephew, who had also been a member of their family until his marriage. Col. Sanders brought his wife and two infant sons with him and a few men also joined the party in Cleveland and in Omaha. They crossed the Plains in covered wagons, drawn by oxen, making about twelve miles each day. Finally they reached Snake River early in September. There they were told that it would be unsafe to try to cross the mountains so late in the season so they turned north to the mining camp of Bannack, arriving there about September 13, 1863.

The primitive living conditions existing in mining towns of that area must have been very hard for women to endure, but Mary, like other pioneer women, made the best of what she had. They found a store building situated near Yankee Flat. It had a floor, a large front room, and a small kitchen. They partitioned the front room to make a large living room and two small bedrooms. The house was heated by two stone fireplaces. A small sheet iron stove was used for cooking. Mary tried her best to beautify their house. The walls of the front room were covered with sheets she brought with her, but there were not enough to hide the logs of the other rooms, and no sheeting could be bought at stores that dealt chiefly with miners. The floors were rough, with no carpets. The walls were destitute of pictures. There were few books in the community, and these went the rounds of those who were fond of literature. Newspapers were several weeks old when they reached the camp and magazines were almost unknown.

A school was opened that spring on Yankee Flat near the Edgerton house with Lucia Darling as teacher. There were fewer than twenty pupils. Before a building could be found, school was held in the front room of her uncle's house. That front room was also used as a bedroom, had one corner curtained off for an office for Sidney. Truly a room of many uses!

Mary must have worried greatly when her husband was sent to Washington to engineer the scheme to divide the Territory, giving the proposed new territory of Montana its present boundaries. He left Bannack early in January, 1864. The stage could not run then because of the depth of the snow, so Sidney had to ride horseback as far as Salt Lake City. During his absence a baby girl was born to them in May, just three days before Montana became a territory. She received the name of Idaho. Sidney returned in July, having secured the division of the territory; the formation of Montana; and the placing of the western boundary line on the Coeur d'Alene, instead of on the Continental Divide, as was first suggested.

Mary never complained, but in a letter to her mother, written about this time, she speaks of being "so lonely," as she might well have been with her husband so far away, a strange doctor, a poor nurse, and absolutely no conveniences.

In the fall of 1865 the family returned to Ohio. Mary was glad to be with her family and friends again and the children needed to be in school, the oldest having reached the age of sixteen. Sidney bought a house in Akron and resumed the practice of law. Mary visited Montana once, in 1882. Her eldest daughter, Martha (my mother) was living at Ft. Benton at that time where her husband, H. P. Rolfe, was practicing law. Mary was the mother of nine children, two of whom died in infancy. Two of her daughters are still living. One of them, Idaho (Mrs. George Buckingham) lives with a daughter in Madison, Ohio; the other, Nina (Mrs. Walter M. Whitman) lives in Walpole, Massachusetts. Martha came to Montana in 1876 with her husband, H. P. Rolfe, and lived here until her death in 1936.

Mary died in Akron, Ohio, August 4, 1864. The Ft. Benton "River Press" in a notice of her death says "Mrs. Edgerton was a lady of great culture and refinement and combined those qualities which endeared her to everyone with whom she associated. Many of the old miners will remember her for the kindly interest she had in their welfare."