

**I**dah Meacham Strobridge was a woman who lived at a crossroads in time and place, a time when all was possibility and nothing, not even daily survival, was taken for granted.

In July of 1862, the United States Congress authorized the Central Pacific Railroad to survey a roadbed 150 miles east of the California state line into the Nevada Territory, to a dot on the map in a place called Lassen Meadows.

George Meacham, a rancher from the Moraga Valley in California, saw opportunity in the expansion of the railroad. He followed the line on the map into the brand new state of Nevada, which had joined the Union on Oct. 31, 1864. Before Christmas of that year, he had moved his wife Phebe and his nine-year-old daughter Laura Idah, to a ranch on the Lassen Meadows, where the Overland and the Applegate-Lassen trails diverged.

Idah Meacham was one of the first white girls to grow up in the valley of the Humboldt River. She watched as covered wagons bumped west across the plain and into the canyons on their way to California, or down the desert to the burgeoning silver mines of Virginia City. She heard the travelers' tales of lost mines and lost lives, Indian attacks and violent adventures of men in that raw new country.

The winters of 1865 through 1867 were big snow years in the Sierra, and the railroad took a long time to make its way over the summit. For two years, the freight wagons and the Overland Stage would have brought news to the Meacham family of the approaching tracks. By the spring of 1868, the grading crews would have come through the valley, readying the ground through the waving rye and meadow grass; by August, construction crews would have been visible from the porch, making an unfamiliar racket through the summer stillness as they pounded spikes and hauled timber and rails. And then, finally, they would have disappeared to the east around the big bend in the Humboldt, and the autumn would be quiet.

It would be their last truly quiet autumn, for the next spring, 1869, the railroads met at Promontory, Utah, and on May 11, the first train ran through Humboldt Valley. Idah's father, still anticipating his fortune, had opened the hotel called Humboldt House on the Central Pacific line, six miles from the ranch, and passenger trains stopped there to feed their travelers supper.

Idah watched as over the next 10 years, the railroad starved out the freight-wagon and

## ***A Life at the Crossroads of Time***

*Idah Meacham Strobridge embraced the frontier life in Nevada.*

*By Carolyn Dufurrena*



stagecoach businesses, as bands of Paiutes gave way to gaggles of fine ladies and gentlemen from the East on their way to California and rough miners on their way to the Comstock—what Idah called an “extravagant mingling of absurdity and magnificence.”

The cattlemen arrived in 1868, with the first herd of longhorns driven into the state from Texas by John Sparks. Before long, the warring with sheep men began and later with farmers who came to settle in the bottomlands. The cattle business grew all through the 1870s, and when Idah finally was to sell her ranch years later, she noted that it had at one time supported as many as 8,000 head.

These happenings all made for fodder for the newspapers, in particular Dan de Quille's *Territorial Enterprise*, and its sharp-witted young writer, Sam Clemens (with the newly minted name Mark Twain). By the time Idah turned 17 in 1872—the year of the Comstock's Big Bonanza—Twain had published “Roughing It,” and put the Humboldt mining

district, at whose foot Idah lived, on the world map.

These were prosperous years in the valley of the Humboldt. The grass grew tall, and through the 1870s and into the 1880s life was good. Idah moved to Oakland in 1877 to finish her education at Mills Seminary. She stayed in California until she married Sam Strobridge, eight years her junior and the adopted son of a railroad construction boss, in the fall of 1884. The couple came back to Nevada to start a family and help her parents with the ranch.

In December 1884, Sam and Idah had a son, Earl, who survived only one day. Two brothers, Gerald in 1886 and Kenneth in the spring of 1888, followed him. That October began the terrible winters that marked the end of Nevada's pioneer era. Nothing would be the same after those two winters of unrelenting snowstorms. Not five percent of the livestock in Nevada survived. Nine of 10 ranchers lost everything they had.

In October of 1888, Kenneth succumbed to pneumonia; a month later, Idah's husband Sam fell ill as well. Idah took him to Oakland, but he did not recover. By mid-1889, Idah's son Gerald had died as well.

Idah remained in California for a time, but by 1890, now aged 35 years, she returned to Humboldt House and the ranch in the desert. Rather than caving in to the harshness of the frontier life, she embraced it. She had learned to live with its realities and its austere beauty, and made the choice, as she says, “to live a life utterly without pretense.”

Within the next five years, she had filed the first water right on the Humboldt River for Humboldt House, and staked mining claims in the Humboldt District. She ran the ranch, and must have accumulated livestock, although it is more than likely her herds of cattle were smaller than in the decade prior. She bought bookbinding equipment and with the help of her father installed it in the garret of the ranch house. She operated the Artemisia Book Bindery from Humboldt House for several years.

At the age of 40, Idah began writing the memories of her years in the desert, crafting short stories and poetry for *Nevada Magazine*, published briefly in Winnemucca around the turn of the century, and for Charles Lummis's *Land of Sunshine*, published in California, as well as for publications like *Sports Afield* and *The Chicago Sun-Times*.

She also struck up a correspondence with Jack London during this time. The younger man was in his “hobo” period, and wrote sev-

eral times of passing through Nevada on the freight trains. It is tempting to think they met at Humboldt House, while he stopped over on his travels and chatted up the lady in the desert with the literary ambitions and the bookbinding business. A note from London to Strobridge from this period extols the virtues of having “breadth and thickness, as well as length, to one’s life”—a description that would certainly fit them both.

By the turn of the century, the good years were over. Drought came to Nevada; the mining boom ground to a halt shortly thereafter. Idah put the ranch up for sale in the fall of 1900 for \$7,500. She advertised in *The Land of Sunshine* and found several buyers for the “880 acres and the oldest water right on the river.” The “fine meadow-land of blue joint wild hay, 30 cows and 15 horses” sold for \$10,000 at the end of 1901.

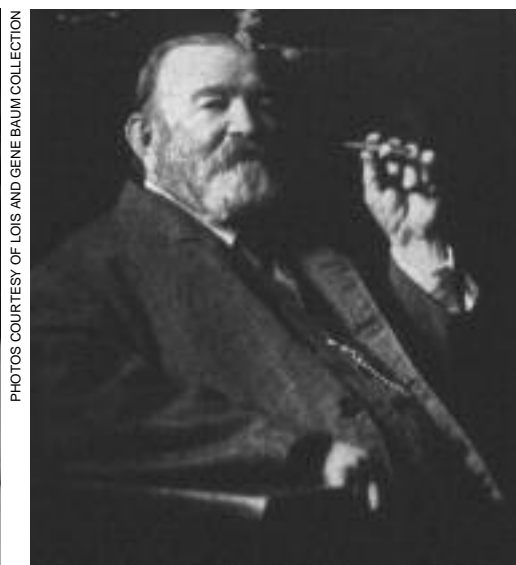
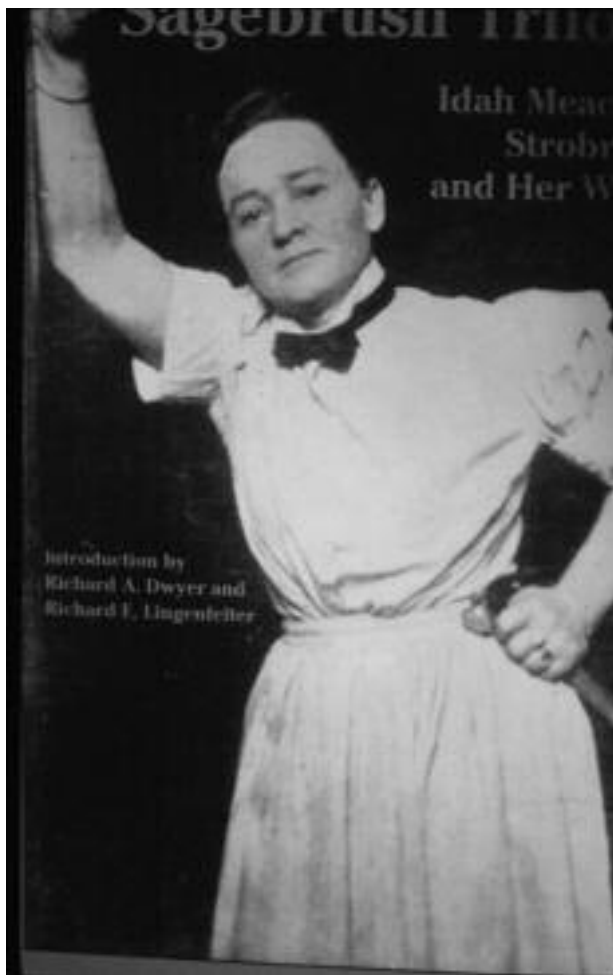
Idah moved to Arroyo Seco, Calif., after the ranch sold. She went to work accumulating her stories into a volume of memoirs, in which her flowery writing masks the true harshness of the life she lived. She published “In Miner’s Mirage-Land” in 1904 at her relocated Artemisia Bindery. It was followed by “The Loom of the Desert” in 1907, and finally, “The Land of Purple Shadows” in 1909, the latter two illustrated by Maynard Dixon.

She won medals for her bookbinding at the California State Fair in 1908 and at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Fair in 1909.

She seems to have remained in California the rest of her life, caring for her aging parents until their deaths. The era that she had known as a girl had completely disappeared by the time she wrote a card for the Nevada Historical Society in 1922, noting that at age 67, she was the last surviving member of her family: “father, mother, sons, all are dead. I am the last.” She died in Los Angeles in 1932.

As difficult as existence must have been for a woman alone on the frontier before the turn of the century, Idah made a successful life in a very traditional male world. She was a rancher, a miner, an author and a publisher—a pioneer in the best Nevada spirit. ■

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF LOIS AND GENE BAUM COLLECTION

AT TOP: Idah’s den at Humboldt House.  
 ABOVE: George Meacham.  
 LEFT: The cover of Idah’s “Sagebrush Trilog.”  
 OPPOSITE: Idah Meacham as a girl.