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Pacific's Oldest Living Graduate

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Pacific's Oldest Living Graduate

Aline Kistler
Prologue to the Pageant of Pacific

Jack London

Sinclair Lewis

James Oliver Curwood

George Sterling

and

Donald O'Donald

Pacific's Diamond Jubilee

**And Out West
Magazine ~ 25c**



RAY
BETHERS

Pacific's Oldest Living Graduate

By ALINE KISTLER

TIME-GNARLED fingers automatically smoothed her black silk waist into unconscious primness as she leaned forward in the great "patent rocker."

The bright eyes shone with a feminine gleam as she recalled the details of that Commencement Day in the spring of 1858 when the first class was graduated from the University of Pacific, the first institution of higher learning chartered west of the Rockies.

She was no longer Mrs. C. D. Brooke of Sacramento, the "oldest living graduate in the West." She was Mary Smith, the eighteen year old girl fluttering at the prospect of receiving her bachelor of arts degree and thrilling at the unwonted occasion.

In fact it was a comparatively small group of people that packed the early California church to hear the graduation essays and addresses of the five young women and five young men who had completed college work and become the first candidates for a degree in the new West.

But that was a triumphant day for Mary Smith in her white tarleton dress. Her essay had been declared the best submitted by the senior class and, besides the flowers and adulation of her friends, she received a coveted prize—four volumes of Rollins' History and a two volume set of Shakespeare. Although she had been the only scholar in the senior class of the Young Ladies Department and in spite of the fact that she had been obliged to interrupt her studies to earn money by teaching at a lumber camp near Woodside, she had won the highest honors.

"And sometimes I wonder if I really made the most of it." It was a reflective Mrs. Brooke who spoke. "Sometimes I wonder if I ever did as much as I should with my college education. It doesn't seem as though I have done much in life. It's sixty-eight years since I graduated and most of that time I haven't done much but live and raise my family and do all the things that had to be done. But I tried to give my children a regard for learning and to make them go ahead.

"Not so long ago a man told me he'd know my children had an educated mother. And that sort of made me feel I hadn't failed with life.

"I used to want to do big things. But somehow there wasn't much chance. There were so many things to do. Housework and children and everything. And we didn't have it easy in those days when I was young. Every thing had to be done the hard way.

"There was the washing and ironing. And Mr. Brooke would wear white shirts. It didn't matter where he was, in the mining camp or the ranch, he always said he didn't feel respectable without a white shirt on. You see, he was a southerner and came of cultured people. How I worked over those white shirts. Many's a time when I was a young bride, I stood over those shirts while my tears sizzled on the iron. It was so hard to get the bosom stiff like Mr. Brooke wanted it."



Mary Smith Brooke

So, little by little, the story came out. The life story of the woman who is today the first of the ever increasing body of Western college men and women.

It is a simple story.

Mary Smith was fifteen years old when her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ansl Smith, left their eastern home to come to California by way of the Isthmus of Panama in 1855. Early the following year, Mary qualified for the advanced class at the Young Ladies Seminary conducted in conjunction with the University of the Pacific. Her fingers were nimble and easily trained in the intricacies of fancy work, Oriental painting on glass and other accomplishments offered the young women. Her mind was quick to grasp mathematics, chemistry, philosophy, algebra and the other studies given at the University. Soon she was

noticed by the professors and teachers at the "brick building," the haunt of the young men, a quarter of a mile from the Seminary—visited by the young ladies only for recitations in the classes. She was only sixteen when financial conditions forced her to leave college to teach school. It was an isolated school in the redwoods up the peninsula and terror struck her heart every time she took the lonely trail from the lumber camp to the school house. There was no other house within sight or sound and, for seven weeks, the lonesome girl taught those pioneer children with fear in her soul, longing desperately for her family and friends.

As soon as she received her degree, she was given a school at Campbell. For three months she coped with the problem of teaching everything from a b c's to philosophy to thirty-five pupils of all ages and grades—all for the munificent sum of fifty dollars.

Then she went to Monterey—to Clarksville—and later to Diamond Springs in Eldorado county, teaching under the harshest conditions. At times she felt she could not go on with it. There were so many hardships—the crudest of housing, sometimes only the country church, often only a rude room with benches around the four walls.

But the spirit that had won her first place in her college studies refused to let her give up no matter what came.

Then came romance.

From others we have intimations that the courtship of young Mr. Brooke was not the first attention the pretty Mary Smith had received but the quizzical lips of the old lady herself refuse to admit any youthful coquetties.

Her heart is still true to the young Southerner who substituted the broom and cradle for the book and slate in her hands.

His vision was her faith—even when he was ridiculed by his neighbors in El Dorado county for planting the first peach orchard in California.

His triumph was hers when he sold that first crop in San Francisco at a dollar a peach.

So on through the years the tides of life have come and gone. Mary Smith Brooke has borne six children and watched five of them reach maturity, yielding her grand children and great grand children. She has worked and suffered and rejoiced. And now, in her eighty-seventh year of life, she has a mental vigor that glories in advance, cherishes learning, and smiles at memories of white tarleton trimmed with blue ribbon.