

The Hard Winter of 1889-1890

By May H. Southern

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EXCERPTS FROM THE DIARY OF **MAY H. SOUTHERN** as Published in *The Searchlight* April 7, 1932.

THE BALMY SPRING WEATHER now prevailing in this section following the winter storms which brought bounteous snowfall to Shasta County and the rest of northern California, makes Miss May H. Southern of the Shasta Historical Society reminiscent. She declared yesterday that last winter was as mild as a zephyr when compared to that of 1889 and 1890.

Miss Southern was a Southern Pacific telegrapher stationed at Sims on the Shasta division that winter. Excerpts from her diary follow:

"Winter set in October 20, with heavy rains. October 30. Train service irregular, landslides numerous, large forces clearing track. By the middle of November unusual amount of rain would have caused great damage by high water if there had been any snow on the ground.

"December 10. Crests of mountains mantled with deep snow. Lower levels white with a promise of what was yet to come. Torrential rains caused washouts and slides, travel unsafe and uncertain. Next few weeks brought terrific rains all through northern California. Railroad bridge at Cottonwood greatly damaged, delayed trains three days. Great damage to bridges and trestles around Colusa, Chico, and Marysville, one-third of the 242 miles of track between Cottonwood and San Francisco washed away or badly damaged, several persons drowned.

"January 15, 1890. Bumper crop of snow began arriving--snowing furiously, like twilight, two feet on the ground this morning. Train 15 crept northward in the teeth of the fiercest snow storm that ever roared down the Sacramento canyon; stalled at Tunnel 11, mile and a half north of Sims; 116 passengers on board, Vice-President C. F. Crocker's private car 'Mishawauka' attached to rear. Snowed incessantly for over sixty hours, fell so fast and furiously the river covered over; reached a depth of eight feet on level, much deeper in drifts.

"Food in diner and Crocker car soon exhausted. Pullman porters carried food on their backs from Sims to feed women and children. My mother started to bake bread day and night as long as flour lasted. Brakeman in Crocker car with pneumonia.

"Problem of heat serious, wood water-logged and buried under snow, coal and candles soon exhausted, darkness made more dismal by howling of panthers, coyotes, and other night animals driven by the snow to seek food lower down. Deer often seen bounding into river pursued by a panther.

"Food becoming scarce, my father slaughtering stock and killing off chickens, complaints of passengers loud and long, cursing the country, the company, and Mr. J. Pluvius. Wires dead, cut off from world. Linemen coming in speechless and half frozen.

"Depot only hot spot, men in overalls crowding in, drying their garments smoking strong tobacco and expectorating copiously on red hot stove. An attempt made from Dunsmuir to rescue train, relief party snowed in at Castle Crag. Relief train on way from Sacramento encountered at Redding, bumped into work train north of Redding and commissary car badly wrecked, did not expect to meet anything coming down the line except snow, scooped out slides all the way to Delta, where snow is four feet deep. Way cleared with pick and shovel to Sims. Arrived January 20 with three hundred men who had been without food thirty hours. They struck, stormed the depot and threatened violence.

"Assistant Superintendent Pratt and other officials barricaded the doors. I was just a young girl and badly frightened by the sight of the starving men who surrounded us. Through a crack in the door negotiations opened with leaders resulting in my father butchering his milk cows. Men tore off hunks of meat with their hands and ate it raw like animals. Took whole day's work to exhume buried train, which left Sims January 22d, south bound and packed high with snow, attracting much attention on its way down the valley. Passengers were sent to Portland by water.

"In answer to the call for snow shovelers had come ex-convicts, bums and toughs of every description, nearly every nation on earth is represented, some in low cut shoes and shirt sleeves. For lack of rubber boots men bound their legs with gunny sacks held in place by bale rope or wire. This soon caked with mud and snow added to the already weight on the feet, and the toilers soon played out. Their complaint was not so much of the scarcity of food as the lack of whisky and the money to buy it.

"At Dunsmuir twelve feet of snow, freight shed crashed in, burying the bodies of William Whiting and a brakeman, killed on the road. Building total loss. Every man engaged in shoveling snow off buildings; church fell in, some houses collapsed and families had to move out. Citizens let nature take its course in clearing premises. Town short of provisions.

"Just north of Upper Soda Springs an Alpine avalanche slid down mountain carrying everything before it, section crossed the Sacramento, dammed the river so completely that no water went through or over dam for twenty minutes. Snow plow and engine buried out of sight. Took a day's excavating to uncover them.

"Sisson Herald, January 25. Inventory of losses by storm: Three large two-story buildings crushed, porches and awnings strewn in ruins on sidewalk. Town looks as if it had been bombarded by hostile army and badly wrecked by exploding shells. Snow packed on sidewalks to second story, every man pressed into service to save cracking roofs; several horses killed; people going in and out of windows; horses fitted with snowshoes.

"Sisson Herald, January 26. We are here, well blockaded, situation worse, provisions to last three weeks, not many cattle, will kill fat horses if necessary. (Paper printed on cloth and old posters.)

"Ten to fifteen feet of snow between Sisson and Edgewood; 125 men at Black Butte without food for twenty-four hours. Dead engines and strings of box cars crushed in by weight of snow strewn all along line from Sims to Edgewood and over Siskiyou. Blockade complete. Greatest depth of snow deposited in Sacramento canyon.

"January 29. General Superintendent Fillmore gave out the following summary of railroad situation:

"Few trains blockaded between Blue Canyon and Shady Run; 1800 men with picks and shovels cutting away snow banks twelve to fifteen feet high; snow on sheds at Summit and Tunnel 13 from 50 to 250 feet deep and in isolated places 500 feet. Three hundred men between Sims and Edgewood with provisions scarce between these points. 3500 men employed extra, of these 2500 men on Central Pacific Railroad. Estimates its loss since trouble began fourteen days ago at \$75,000 a day or over \$1,000,000 to January 29th.

"January 1[sic February]. Seventeen days blockade lifted in the Sierra; Emigrant Gap out of food, great suffering; 500 loaded freight cars snowed in on sidings, great damage, buildings crushed, lives lost, damage still growing.

"Sacramento Valley flooded. Coast towns under water. Persons suffering for food; death rate high from pneumonia and la grippe. Business at complete standstill.

"At Tunnel 9 between Sims and Delta, probably biggest slide that ever swooped down mountain side filled tunnel and river; north end of tunnel buried one hundred feet.

"February 11. Railroad situation going from bad to worse. Slide in Cow Creek Canyon, Oregon, formed a lake three miles long and seventy-five feet deep, besides filling a tunnel. Estimated loss to railroad \$1,500,000. All hopes given up for clearing track, Ashland to Portland, for many weeks. Oregon towns under water; great loss of livestock; terrific rains all through northern California.

"Central Pacific again blockaded; snow sheds toppling over with snow. Sacramento River at Red Bluff twenty-five feet above high water mark, still rising. Fills in Siskiyou sinking, banks and high sides caving, cuts filled. Downpour leveled snow from nine to four feet at Sisson. Literally speaking the road is gone in.

"The road finally was opened in the middle of April after fifteen miles of new track was laid."