

Mary Elizabeth Post --- High Priestess of Americanization

(The Story of a Citizen Yet Very Much Alive.)

(By C. Louise Boehringer.)

Colorful and rich in contact with a community in its evolution through a long period of pioneering to present day progress, serene and contented in contemplation of past decades, and yet ever forward-looking is the life of Mary Elizabeth Post.

A call for teachers in the newly developing territory of Arizona brought her to Arizona 57 years ago.*

"How did you happen to come to the West—and to Arizona?" is a natural question and one often asked of Miss Post when you learn that she came from a New York home where she had academic advantages and had begun a teaching career in 1856. To this question she always answers, "Nothing ever just happens in this world. I was born and educated for my work and, when the time came for my work here—I was here." With Shakespeare, she believes, "There's a Divinity that shapes our ends, though hew them as we may." She likes, too, to refer to the story of Napoleon in which he unfolded certain of his plans to a lady of his acquaintance, who said, "Man proposes but God disposes." Napoleon answering her said, "I both propose and dispose"—and went to his Waterloo.

However, the life of Mary Elizabeth Post has not been without plan, and high purpose has been her guiding star from her childhood days in New York to her still active life in Arizona, the state of her adoption.

The oldest of nine children, Mary Post was born on the anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill, June 17, 1841, on the shore of Lake Champlain in Elizabethtown, New York. Her early education was received in the district school and under private tutors. Later she attended school at Ft. Edward, Col-

*Free schools were established by an Act of the legislature in 1868. This law was repealed and others passed in 1871 and in 1875. In the latter year, Governor Safford, who was an enthusiastic schoolman, was made superintendent of schools. Schools were opened for boys in Tucson in 1867 by August Briehta, and in 1871 by John A. Spring. Two teachers were also at work in Yuma. But in 1872 a call went out from Arizona for teachers.



MARY ELIZABETH POST
At 30 Years of Age

legiate Institute and at Keyesville, N. Y., graduating from a private school in Burlington, Vermont, just across the lake. She had three months' teaching experience in 1856, but wished to graduate from college before seeking a teaching position in the South. State universities would not admit women at that time, so she entered, and graduated from a private school. Then, the Civil War broke out, and the door to teaching in the South was closed. The president of the private school offered her a position in his school, but her father announced that he was going West with his family and did not wish to leave her behind.

In December of 1863, the Post family left northern New York for Iowa. Here Mary Post began teaching in a private Normal in Waukon, and later took a position in the new high school at Lansing, Iowa. Later, when offered a position at Upper Iowa University, she declined to accept it because the salary was inadequate. She had heard rumors of better salaries in California. In July of 1869, the Union Pacific railroad was completed, and in 1870 she said, "Now, there are no lions in the way, and I'll go to California to teach in the rural schools where almost any little school pays a good salary. So after eight years of teaching in Iowa, she was ready in 1872 to go on the journey that she had declined when an uncle offered to take her while she was still a student in New York.

She left Lansing, Iowa, in a covered sleigh, driving in a blinding snow storm thirty miles to McGregor, the northern limit of the river railroad. There she took a train, making changes at Dubuque, Cedar Rapids and Council Bluffs. At the latter point the train crossed the river on a bridge laid on the ice and after one more change at Omaha, the train was on its way to San Francisco. At that time there were no snowsheds, and those on this long trip realized their good fortune in losing only twenty-four hours in the snowdrifts, when they learned that the train leaving Omaha the following day was five weeks in reaching San Francisco.

After spending ten days in San Francisco with a cousin's family, Miss Post took a steamer for New Town, now San Diego, where her uncle, a physician, had established a sanitarium twenty miles out in the mountains. There were no railroads in California at this time except the overland and a short line to Wilmington, the port of Los Angeles. Los Angeles had a population of 8,000 at this time. In New Town (San Diego), Miss Post stayed with friends, Mr. and Mrs. Capron. Mr. Capron was the government contractor of the stage route from New Town to Messilla, New Mexico, a route of 800 miles.

One morning Mr. Capron came in and said, "They have sent word from Arizona that they want a teacher at Ehrenburg, 125 miles up the Colorado river. Will you go?" As Mr. Capron had lived in Arizona for a number of years, where he was said to have made "a barrel of money," and knew Arizona conditions, she asked him, "Is it perfectly safe and proper for a young, unmarried woman to go alone to Arizona?" He laughed and replied, "I assure you that any lady who goes to Arizona and conducts herself as a lady will be treated like a princess." She decided to go, and preparations began for a 250 mile stage trip. There were two stages a week, and after making her decision there were three days in which to get ready. The fare was forty dollars in gold. Greenbacks were the common medium of exchange, but they were reckoned at ninety cents on the dollar. Each passenger was allowed only thirty pounds of baggage. On Mr. Capron's advice, she had the porter at the hotel buy her a small trunk, in which she packed only her thinnest clothing, for Arizona was reported as a warm place, leaving the rest of her baggage at the Horton House in San Diego.

Mr. Capron prepared her for this new experience by explaining the nature of the trip and some of the things to be expected. It would mean a continuous trip of 250 miles, traveling day and night, stopping only every fifteen or twenty miles to change horses, and sometimes, drivers. Stops would be made three times a day, long enough to eat meals. He said that if a stand storm came up and the driver lost his way, not to be alarmed for he would simply turn the back of the stage toward the storm and wait until it was over and then proceed on his way. He advised her to stay in Arizona City (Yuma), with the two teachers there until the steamer was ready to go up to Ehrenburg where her young charges were waiting for a teacher. At that time steamers plied up and down the Colorado on an irregular schedule. When the boat was loaded with freight it was time to go.

The stage, called a "mud wagon," was a canvas covered wagon similar to an ambulance, containing two seats, each of which accommodated two persons. If she should be the only passenger on the back seat, she could recline for a part of the trip. When it drove up, it contained the full quota of passengers and it meant sitting up straight for 48 hours on a continuous trip. The other passengers were a merchant from Florence and an agent for the Sacaton Indian Agency, beside the driver.

The whole trip was a novel experience for this young eastern teacher. The rapid change of horses, each new change of two teams breaking into a dead run the moment the driver had the four in hand and the station men left the horses heads, was most exciting. A short run in the hot, deep sand soon tempered their zeal. Meals enroute were one dollar each. At Mountain Springs (Jacumba), the men of the party announced that she would enjoy some Arizona strawberries for dinner. When the table was spread and the hungry passengers were seated, Mary Post made her first acquaintance with the pink beans that are still such a staple article in the Southwest.

Of course, they lost their way. It occurred toward morning of the last night. The men noticed the driver wavering in an uncertain course and learned he had gotten off the road. They insisted that there be no more driving until the road was located. So every one got out, and soon mesquite from near the Colorado river was piled high and a bright bonfire cheered them until daylight, when the road was readily discovered and all went on their way rejoicing.

On a beautiful spring afternoon, April 13, 1872, they reached Arizona City, (Yuma), so covered with the dust of the California desert that the original color of all clothing was completely concealed. The driver took the young teacher to the place where the other two teachers were living. Here she was given water for her ablutions, that proved the propriety of the name of the river from which it was taken.

To reach her school at Ehrenburg, Miss Post took the steamer up the river when it had its load of freight. Among passengers on her first trip was Captain Polhamus, who became a prominent figure in the early navigation of the Colorado river when boats from the Gulf of California traversed the Colorado.

On reaching her school at Ehrenburg, this venturesome auburn-haired young woman found herself the only American woman in camp. The children spoke no English and the teacher spoke no word of Spanish. One of her trustees in this lively mining camp was a Spanish Californian who spoke both languages. He introduced her pupils to her and helped her in the organization of the first day's program.

Here teacher and pupils bridged the chasm of language, and learning and play proceeded happily for five months, the total of the school year. Then came a call from Yuma.

On the first day of October, 1873, Mary Post began the first year of more than a half century program of Americaniza-

tion in Yuma. At that time, there was only one short street in Yuma, and the little adobe school house stood on this street. It had previously been court house and jail. The railroad had not yet pushed into Yuma, and none came for five years—not until 1877. For one year (1874), Miss Post went to teach in San Diego, where nine teachers were teaching in temporary buildings. An invitation came to return to Yuma, and this time she recognized it as a distinct call to service, and she returned to Yuma to stay.

The Board in Yuma decided to divide the rapidly growing school, and asked Miss Post to select a man to come to teach the boys, asking her to give her entire attention to the girls of the community. To this work she brought her brother, Albert E. Post, the father of Anita C. Post, who teaches in the Romance Language department of our State University. Albert Post was a musician and he brought with him the first organ which is now in the State Museum at the University. Thus was launched the setting for a most effective community Americanization evolution.

At this time all the little girls were wearing long, peculiar dresses, such as little Indian girls still wear on the reservations. The stores were full of attractive goods brought in by steamer from San Francisco. The Butterick patterns had just been patented and were coming into use, but the Spanish mothers of this isolated country did not know what little girls in other places were wearing. Mary Post knew how to use her needle and loved to work with pretty goods. More than this, she loved people and wanted to bring to them the things of life that would make it more attractive and richer. A friend in the East sent her copies of the *Delineator*, and from them she ordered patterns to fit every little girl in school. Then she went from house to house and cut dresses and showed every mother how to make them.

In the community were about a half dozen American women and numbers of American men with Spanish wives. The Spanish women were eager to know how to make cakes. Cake was not a part of Spanish cookery and the women wanted instruction in the art. Perhaps they recognized the art as an approach to the "hearts" of the American men. So Miss Post again went about from home to home and the aroma of cakes was in the air.

Spanish people are lovers of music, have musical voices and respond readily to musical instruction. Mary Post and her brother, Albert Post, the two teachers, taught their pupils to sing American songs. Often the parents of the children gathered outside the schoolhouse to hear them sing American patri-

otic songs. Every Friday afternoon, as a respite from regular study, the girls in this Americanizing institution spent in sewing, embroidering, and with all sorts of needlework.

The first Christmas in Yuma after the coming of the two American teachers was a happy time, and several now living remember that day. In this early period, when the Yuma gold mines were flourishing, there was plenty of work for everyone. Wages were high for there were not enough workers to do all the development. Money flowed as freely as did the wine of that day. Some weeks before Christmas, preparations were begun for a Christmas tree and a program. Captain Polhamus of the Steamship Navigation Company volunteered to pass the hat for Christmas funds. He went out into the street among the prosperous workers and in one hour had collected \$600 for the Christmas tree.

The tree and all the Christmas supplies were purchased in San Francisco. The leading merchant of Yuma offered the services of his purchasing agent, and the Steamship Navigation Company brought them in free of charge. They came around Cape St. Lucas, up the Gulf of California into the Colorado river and up to the dock in Yuma. Never was there a more heavily laden tree. A case of costly toys, a doll for every little girl, a musical toy for every little boy, and a book for every child who could read.

The Christmas music was a special feature of the program, for it consisted of American Christmas songs. Everyone was thrilled and happy. Every little girl wore a new dress made from a Butterick pattern. A former theatrical sign painter decorated the fireplace and the mayor of the town acted the part of Santa Claus. When he slid down the chimney, many of the children cried with fright and excitement.

At the close of each school year, until the railroad came in 1877, all the children were taken on a steamer excursion and picnic. This was a gala day for the community and dancing and all sorts of games were in order. Dancing was the chief entertainment for the young people at that time.

As other teachers came to this new country, marriages became the fashion. Teachers rarely taught their full term, but married and opened new homes. Numbers of persons only temporarily married, hastened to have a marriage ceremony and an American wedding, as did the teachers. Mary Post was present at most of these weddings, but just as George Washington, though childless, is hailed as the "Father of his country,"

so she has permitted no one to beckon her into a life of devotion in a single home, but has remained the "High Priestess" of an ever-growing Spanish-American group. Many times groups of citizens have called upon her to go to some home on a delicate mission. She has been peacemaker, and to hundreds of young people "A Mother Confessor." She has taught the children and grandchildren of her first pupils. Some of her first pupils still living in Yuma include Mrs. Chona Naylor, Mrs. Luz Balsz and Mrs. Dolores Figueroa.

In 1912, Miss Post, having passed seventy years of age, became the inspiration for Arizona's first pension law for teachers, which provides fifty dollars per month (\$600 per year) for retired teachers. Under this law, teachers may retire after thirty years of service, half of which must be in Arizona. Miss Post had taught forty years in Arizona, after teaching eight years in Iowa and several years in New York. She had spent her salary freely to enrich the lives of those among whom she worked, and just as freely did she give her time and effort. By 1912, the year of her retirement from the teaching staff, Yuma had two grade schools and had established a Union High School.

Retirement from the schoolroom did not retire this energetic teacher to a place less useful in the community. For fifteen years after that date her working day was a longer one than any school day. When Miss Post came West, she was more than an ordinary student of English, Latin and French. During her years of work among Spanish speaking people, she added that language to her linguistic accomplishments. After retirement she found herself in constant demand for private tutoring, and as interpreter for the Court, the Reclamation Service and for the Spanish priests. Her private students are a cosmopolitan group. Among them are members of every race and every religion—Pagans and Christians, Jews and Gentiles; Catholics and Protestants; Mohammedans and infidels.

Woman suffrage interested Miss Post, and the year after suffrage was granted to Arizona women, when an opportunity presented itself for Yuma women to express themselves through the ballot, she was as active as any woman in the community. She is as independent in her ballot, as she is in the expression of her views in any other direction.

In 1916 when Miss Post had reached her seventy-fifth birthday, the University of Arizona conferred upon her an honorary degree for her long and useful service to the state of her adoption. No year passes without some proof coming to her of apprecia-

tion of the work she has done. How beautiful to receive one's flowers while yet among the living!

In June of this year (1929), Miss Post passed her eighty-seventh milestone. What sort of person is this "octegenarian plus?" Life to her is an interesting gift and every moment of it must be usefully and pleasurably spent.

When she came to Yuma fifty-seven years ago, she found the Catholic church the only church there. Although a member of the Methodist church in her youthful days in New York, her Catholic spirit and the need for workers, made her at home in this religious body. While a French student in New York she had on numerous occasions attended the Catholic church to listen to French sermons. The ceremonial form of worship interested her then, but there was no thought of becoming a communicant. Not until 1915, over forty years after she began working in the Catholic church, did she finally become a communicant. Church work and worship have always held a significant place in her busy life.

The three recreational activities that fill her life today are reading, light needlework and—cross-word puzzles. All her life Miss Post has been a reader of the best magazines and has built up a good library of books that she cares to own. She is a member of the Yuma Carnegie Library Board. Even when reading for pure entertainment, good style must be evident to hold her interest. When on a quest for information, she will take infinite pains to run down the elusive facts. In the summer time she may be seen in the Los Angeles Public Library consulting reference volumes, or selecting books for reading in her own room. Recently she has been reading Page's "Life and Letters," in three volumes, and "The Training of an American;" "Our Times;" Beveridge's "Life of Lincoln;" Strachey's "Queen Victoria;" Herman Melville's "Disraeli;" "Mother India;" "An Indian Journey;" "Black Valley;" "The Father;" "The Magic Isle;" "Count and Counterpoint" and Galsworthy's "Swan Song." Biography is her special choice. She enjoyed especially Beveridge's "Life of Lincoln," as it was with Lincoln during the Civil War period that she began to take an interest in the public men of her time. Her attitude toward authors is a very personal one. If an author displeases or offends her she does not care to continue his acquaintance. Among those whose acquaintance she has cut are Sinclair Lewis, Christopher Morley, Theodore Dreiser and John Galsworthy. A book that has given her special pleasure is "El Amor de los Amores,"

not yet translated into English. The peculiar quality of Spanish religious devotion it portrays touches a responsive chord in her.

Her interest in languages and in the niceties of words account in part for the entertainment and satisfaction she finds in cross-word puzzles. She likes them best for a certain soothing effect just before going to sleep, at the close of a busy day. She has cultivated the art of letter writing and her close friends are the recipients of interesting letters of her reactions to the books she reads and to the events of the day.

During the past year, the eighty-seventh year of her life, she has taken a quiet satisfaction in setting her house in order. She has gone over her extensive private collection of books and has given collections of 100 books to six different young people of her acquaintance, and has picked out fifty special volumes to send to her most intimate friends with a personal letter which makes the gift even more significant.

Each of the 650 volumes bestowed upon her friends has on its inside cover her bookplate, carefully chosen to express her love of flowers and books.

In many ways Mary Elizabeth Post has left her impress upon Yuma citizens for several decades. To her early pupils, some of whom she meets on the streets and in community gatherings, she is still "La Maestra" (The Teacher). Serene contentment is hers for she found her work, and to it she has given herself. She has lived to enjoy the recognition and appreciation of many friends for a life well spent—beautiful flowers while yet living. With George Sand, in retrospect of a long life well spent, she can say, "The end is a goal—not a catastrophe."



Latest Picture of
MARY ELIZABETH POST