

Teachers' Guide for
The Betsy Ross of the Bears

by Rick Foster

performed by
Lillian McLeod

produced by
Duende: Drama & Literature

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The writing of *The Betsy Ross of the Bears* was supported in part by a grant from the Bashford York Fund and the play is dedicated to the memory of historian Bashford York (1922-1994). For twenty years in Tuolumne County she captivated audiences with the Forest Service visitor program, "People, Past and Present," introducing thousands to the men and women who shaped California's history. She had a special interest in Nancy Kelsey whose life story Bashford was working on before her untimely death in an automobile accident in the high country. Bashford, a true pioneer of living history, touched many lives with her wit, humor, talent, grace, and friendship. Her spirit lives on!

For more information on Bashford York or the Bashford York Memorial Fund contact the Summit Ranger District, #1 Pinecrest Lake Road, Pinecrest, CA 95364. Phone (209) 965-3434.

Material for Teachers
to accompany performances of the play
The Betsy Ross of the Bears
produced by Duende: Drama & Literature

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Introduction

The Betsy Ross of the Bears is the story of California Pioneer Nancy Kelsey, as told by herself. It covers ten years of her life from the time just before she left for California in May, 1841, till her husband, Ben Kelsey, insists they move from their cabin in Sonoma to Humboldt County in 1851.

Nancy Kelsey was a real person. She was probably illiterate. In any case, she left no writings—neither journals, letters, nor narratives for publication. A large number of the early immigrants were no better educated than she. For this reason, we know far less about how this class of Americans felt about their adventures than we do about the middle classes whose letters and diaries and memoirs are legion.

We know more about Kelsey because of the accidents of history. She happened to have been the first U.S. woman to cross the Sierra Nevada, and she happened to be in Sonoma when the Bear Flag Revolt had its moment of historical glory, and she happened to have the fabric needed for the Bear Flag. Because of all this she was remembered and interviewed late in life. This interview was published. Thus some of her own words and views have come down to us.

This guide is structured first to provide some background surrounding the periods of Kelsey's life that are covered in the play. Then it includes two final sections on the historicity of the play and a list of resource materials.

The sections are:

I. The Journey West

II. Before the Mexican American War

III. The Mexican-American War Period

IV. Post War, Gold Rush, and the Clear Lake Disaster

V. History and Fiction

VI. Production History of the Play

VI. Resource Suggestions for Teachers

I. The Journey West

Nancy Kelsey came to California with the Bidwell-Bartleson Party in 1841. This was the first planned overland emigration from the U.S. to California. At that time and for the next few years, Oregon was the more popular destination for U.S. emigrants to the Pacific shore. Here are figures for overland emigration prior to the Gold Rush:

Year	Emigrants to Oregon	Emigrants to California
1840	13	0
1841	40	34
1842	125	0
1843	875	38
1844	1,475	53
1845	2,500	260
1846	1,200	1,500
1847	4,000	450
1848	1,300	400

(From: *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party: 1841 California Emigrant Adventure*, ed. by Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., Santa Cruz, 1991)

The Bidwell-Bartleson Party was initially part of a larger group that left Westport, Missouri (now Kansas City) on May 18, 1841. On August 10, at Soda Springs, in what is now Idaho, the group split and its larger part continued to Oregon.

The entire journey of those bound for California is well-documented in *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party: 1841 California Emigrant Adventure*, ed. by Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., Santa Cruz, 1991. This book is a convenient collection of the known primary sources generated by participants.

John Bidwell kept a journal which he drew on for several long publications later in his life. Other members Josiah Belden, Colonel J.B. Chiles, Nicholas Dawson, Charles Hopper, James Springer, Robert H. Thomas, Pierre Jean de Smet, Joseph Williams, Nicholas Point, and James John wrote either letters or journals that have

survived, or they published their narratives of the adventure.

At the start of the journey there were four Kelsey brothers: Ben and Andrew went to California while Samuel and Zedediah stayed with the party bound for Oregon. With Ben was his wife Nancy and their daughter. With Samuel was his wife and five children. Zedediah married the daughter of Rev. Richard Williams while on the trail. None of the Kelseys wrote anything that has survived. Only Nancy had her words recorded, very late in life, by a neighbor, Addison Powell, in 1892. It is from this account that I draw many of the incidents related in the play.

Chronology of the Journey of 1841

May 18	Depart Westport, Missouri
May 31 or June 1	Zedediah Kelsey marries Miss Williams
June 1	Reach the Platte River in central Nebraska
June 22	Reach Fort Laramie, Wyoming
July 16	Reach South Pass, Wyoming
August 3	Bear Lake on the Utah-Idaho border
August 10	Soda Springs, Idaho, Group splits
August 30	Reach Great Salt Lake
September 16	Wagons abandoned in eastern Nevada
October 2	Reach point in Nevada where the Humboldt River turns south
October 15	Reach the foot of the Sierra Nevada, enter California
October 18	Cross the ridge of the Sierra
October 20-25	Uncertain how to get down the mountains
October 26	First rains; snow on the high Sierra
November 3	Cross the San Joaquin near confluence with the Stanislaus
November 4	Reach Marsh's ranch near Mt. Diablo
December	The Kelseys reach Sutter's Fort

II. Before the Mexican American War

According to Nancy, the Kelseys worked with Sutter in 1842, killing elk near Clear Lake and making what Nancy called Spanish boots, for which Sutter paid them. They established good relations with Mariano Vallejo, though at first his brother Salvador was hostile to them.

In May 1843 they took cattle to Oregon, reunited with the Kelseys who had gone there (including a fifth brother, David, who had come in 1843), and all five Kelsey brothers and their families returned to California in 1844.

That same year the Kelseys joined Sutter in supporting the unpopular new governor, Manuel Micheltorena, appointed by Mexico to rule California. Micheltorena remained in California only a few months before he was chased out by a revolution of the Californios. However, none of his Anglo supporters was punished for supporting him.

In 1845 David Kelsey died of smallpox in what is now Stockton. By this time Nancy and Ben were established near Sonoma.

This was a time of increasing tension between the Anglos and Californios as the Mexican American War loomed. The Californios were split between those, like Mariano Vallejo, who wanted California to be annexed by the U.S. and those, like José Castro, who mistrusted the Yankees and wanted them out.

When John C. Frémont arrived in California in late 1845, on his second surveying expedition to the Far West, suspicions were raised that his appearance was connected with a forthcoming war of conquest. In early 1846 he led his company into areas prohibited by the Mexican authorities, further fanning the flames of animosity and nearly coming to pitched battle with Castro's troops near Hollister. Nevertheless, Frémont led his men north to Oregon intending to look for a gentler route to California than any yet known.

No sooner had Frémont crossed the Oregon border than he was overtaken by a special messenger sent by President Polk, informing him that war was imminent. Frémont immediately returned to the hills above Sacramento and fomented the Americans in California into declaring the independent state that came to be called the Bear Flag Republic.

Ben Kelsey was almost certainly present at the meeting in the hills between Frémont and the Americans. He may even have accompanied the messenger on the trip to Oregon. Ben and at least two more of the Kelsey brothers were active in the early stages of the Bear Flag Revolt.

III. The Mexican American War Period

Only four weeks after the Americans proclaimed their “republic,” word reached California that war had been declared between the U.S. and Mexico. Since it was widely assumed that a U.S. victory would mean the annexation of California, there was no longer a need for the Bear Flag. All the U.S. citizens in California could fight for the conquest as members of an official U.S. militia.

The Kelseys enlisted with Frémont. Nancy would later claim to have baked bread for his men. She also claimed that Ben played an honorable role in what is perhaps the most dishonorable thing Frémont is known to have done during the conflict: the killing of the unarmed José Berreyessa and the de Haro twins. Nancy told the story much as I relate it in the play. A more complete telling can be found at the Marin County historical web site:

<http://www.marinweb.com/history/articles/carson.htm>

Interestingly, I have found no other source, beyond Nancy’s oral history, that places Ben Kelsey at the site of the killings.

Nancy also complains that Ben never received the pension that would have been due him for his service to the U.S. cause.

The war in California was a low-grade affair with minimal casualties on both sides. The Californios initially resigned themselves to the U.S. control, but arrogant and harsh treatment by Commodore Stockton and Frémont caused a counter-revolution in July, 1846. The Californios recaptured Los Angeles and held it for three months until on January 10, 1847 it was taken by Stockton. Three days later the remaining resisters surrendered to Frémont and the war was over in California, just as it grew more violent in central Mexico.

IV. Post War, Gold Rush, and the Clear Lake Disaster

The war was over in early 1847 in California even as the major campaign in Mexico was underway. Forward-looking Yanks and Californios began to gear up for a more active economy, though in that year of 1847 no one could guess just how quickly that economy would be utterly transformed.

Ben Kelsey went into partnership with Mariano Vallejo in a sawmill near Sonoma. Ben and Andy Kelsey, together with a man named Charles Stone, founded a huge cattle ranch on a land grant bordering Clear Lake. This land grant supposedly predated the war but would later be disallowed in the U.S. Courts. Ben and Nancy continued living near Sonoma while Andy and Stone conscripted Indians to build a large adobe ranch house, imported hundreds of head of cattle, hogs, and horses. They recruited a dozen or so Indians as cowboys and worked them under two Indian foremen named Shuk and Xasis, but dealt harshly with the people who had lived for centuries on the land they were ranching.

When gold was discovered in early 1848, Ben Kelsey conscripted a band of Indians, probably from the Clear Lake group. He took them to what is now El Dorado County and extracted several thousand dollars worth in a few days. He increased his fortune by driving sheep to the diggings to sell to the miners and used these profits to set up a trading post in the Sacramento Valley, but an asthma attack forced him to abandon the post and the investment was lost.

At the end of 1849 the Indians at Clear Lake, who were facing starvation on the Stone-Kelsey Ranch, rebelled and killed Stone and Andy Kelsey. The following spring a company of dragoons from the U.S. Army attacked the Indian villages and slaughtered more than sixty, mostly women and children. This event is known as the Bloody Island Massacre. There is a fascinating account of this sorry episode written by a Pomo Indian, William Ralgalan Benson. Born in 1862, Benson never attended school and didn't learn English till he was an adult. He taught himself to read and write English. After interviewing five of the men who had helped kill Stone and Andy Kelsey, and having grown up among survivors of the massacre, he created a truly remarkable document, showing the events from an Indian point of view. Most impressive is the stark factual nature of his account, not dwelling moralistically on the actions of the whites nor turning his own people, the victims, into heroes. This document has been reprinted in *The Way We Lived: California Indian Reminiscences, Stories, and Songs*, ed. by Malcolm Margolin, Berkeley, 1981.

After the failure of his trading post and the loss of the Clear Lake Ranch, Ben Kelsey's wanderlust took command of him and he moved the family to Humboldt County. Nancy was still only twenty-seven years old.

Ben Kelsey was only beginning to move his family around. After Humboldt county they returned briefly to Sonoma, then to Oregon a second time, then to Mexico for a year or more. In 1861 they returned to the U.S. and spent time in Texas where a band of Comanche Indians scalped one of their daughters who survived the incident but became mentally unbalanced and died six years later in Fresno, California. In the remaining years of his life Ben moved the family at least to Lompoc, Inyo County, and Los Angeles, where he died in 1888. Nancy spent her final years in the remote Cuyama Mountains in San Diego County where her knowledge of herbs and midwifery were legendary among the scattered settlers. Her interview with Addison Powell was published in the San Francisco Examiner, February 5, 1893 and the part of it pertaining to the events of 1841 appears in *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*.

V. History and Fiction

The facts of history rarely organize themselves into a completely satisfactory work for stage. History has loose ends. History sprawls. The historical record is full of holes. Every fact wants to be qualified by a dozen other facts. Drama wants to tie things up. Drama lives by compression. Drama requires that we know enough about the central character to feel that we understand her deeply. Drama needs its facts to be clear and of limited ambiguity.

So a play like *The Betsy Ross of the Bears*, while it struggles to be true to history, still must add and subtract if it is to be true to the demands of drama.

Some of the things we add are plausible guesses, based on what we do know. Other things we add are for the sake of drama or theatricality or as illustrations of the themes that impelled us to write the play in the first place.

Here are some things I added to what is known and why I added them:

Nancy's singing: There is no mention in the historical record that singing was important to Nancy Kelsey. But the songs I have given her to sing were all popular in American churches in the 1840s. Since I was writing for Lillian McLeod, who has a wonderful singing voice, I couldn't resist adding the songs and choosing songs that would embody the feelings she has. Some of these feelings, like her loneliness on the windy mountain, are a part of the record.

Nancy's relationship to her mother: There is no mention of her mother in the historical record. But I asked myself: What would a mother think if her seventeen-year-old daughter and new grand-daughter took off on the first wagon train to California? And what would a judgmental mother think of a rather shady character like Ben Kelsey? This let me explore the feelings of tension between mother and daughter that are universal but which were not so often put in words a hundred and fifty years ago.

Nancy's seeds: There is no mention that she brought seeds from Missouri and that they represented everything good about her childhood. But knowing that, at the end of her life, she was renowned for her knowledge of herbs, it seemed more dramatic to establish her connection to the earth via something as tangible as the seeds.

Nancy's anguish about leaving Sonoma: In her interview with Powell she is not critical of her late husband in any way. She is a "good wife" in the terms defined during the last century. But I wanted to explore how hard it must have been for the woman, raising three daughters, to suddenly uproot and take off every time her husband gets the whim.

Nancy's dining with Mariano Vallejo: We don't know that she did. But we do know that Ben and Vallejo started the saw mill and that Nancy spoke well of Vallejo and the gentlemanly Californios she met. Not all U.S. immigrants were so enlightened.

Nancy's visiting Frémont's camp and forming her opinion of him at that early date: It's not recorded that Nancy did this. More likely she was back in Sonoma with the children. At first I wrote the scene as reported to her by Ben. But it became so much more lively when she was able to report her own observations.

Here are some things that are part of the record though they sound far fetched:

The first incident at Clear Lake when Salvador Vallejo and his men chase down and kill the negro, behave so barbarously, arrest the Kelseys only to have them escape at night: This is part of Nancy's story. I have no idea who that negro was, how he got to California in 1842, or if Nancy might have been incorrect in identifying him.

The story of Frémont ordering the murder of Berryessa and the De Haros: This is part of the record. In H. H. Bancroft's monumental History of California he tells the story in some detail and thinks it the worst blot on Frémont's character. Nancy's memoir is the only source that puts Ben at the center of the action.

The story of the Indian whom Nancy thinks wants to lasso her: The details of this story are all from the historical record. Except that she does not link the man to the killing of her brother-in-law or to the massacre of the Indians at Clear Lake.

VI. Production History of the Play

Initially this play was the second scene of a play called *Women of the Bear* which gave the stories of three women whose lives were intimately connected with the Bear Flag Revolt. In the first scene of that play Jessie Benton Frémont tells her story: how her husband, John Frémont, led the U.S. forces in California, why he was court marshaled, how these events caused her to lose a child, etc. The third scene is the story of a fictional character I call Lucy Elder, an Indian woman and the wife of the Indian foreman who tries to feed the village and winds up participating in the killing of Stone and Andy Kelsey.

Women of the Bear received its premiere at Stage 3 Theater in Sonora, California in October 1998. The Betsy Ross of the Bears was first performed in December 1998 and is available for through 2000.

VII. Web Sites to Visit to Explore Further

A Good Place to Start

<http://www2.pbs.org/weta/thewest/>

This is the site for the PBS series on The West. It has a fine overview and many pages directly relevant to the period of the play.

Web sites on the Bartleson-Bidwell Party and the period before the Mexican American War

<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist2/bidwell1.html>

This is one of Bidwell's accounts of the journey that Nancy Kelsey shared and of the period before the Gold Rush.

It is on the San Francisco Museum web site and has many fine links to other primary sources on the Early U.S. period.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cbhtml/cbhome.html>

This is on the Library of Congress web site. It is the home page for the "California as I Saw It" section. From here you can find dozens of primary sources, including Bidwell's memoir, Jessie Benton Fremont's writing on California, J. Ross Browne (who was the secretary at the California Constitutional Convention), Dame Shirley (under Clappe, Louisa) and many more.

Web Sites for the Mexican American War

http://www.historyguy.com/Mexican-American_War.html

A brief outline of the Mexican American War with links to other relevant sites.

<http://sunsite.unam.mx/revistas/1847/>

A Mexican view of the Mexican American War

<http://ac.acusd.edu/History/text/diplo/guadalupehidalgo.html>

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the War

<http://www.ccnet.com/~laplaza/calhist4.htm>

A good summary of the Mexican American War in California

<http://www.marinweb.com/history/articles/carson.htm>

The Marin County historical site.

Web Sites for the Indians the Kelseys would have Dealt With

<http://indy4.fdl.cc.mn.us/~isk/art/basket/pomohist.html>

This site on Pomo history and culture deals with both the past and the survival of the culture today.

<http://www.curtis-collection.com/tribalindex.html>

This is the tribal index page for the E.S. Curtis collection. Curtis was the great photographer of Indians a hundred years ago. Scroll down to the contents for Volume 14 to link to major California groups. It was the Pomo on whose land the Kelseys lived in Sonoma and Clear Lake. The coast and lake Miwok lived near by. There are some excellent old images on these pages.