

Experiences of One of the First Ladies in Tonopah

by Mrs. Nay (formerly Lottie Stimler)

I was born in the mining town of Belmont Nye County, Nevada, August 25th 1877, in which place and vicinity I have spent my whole life. I received a common school education in the Belmont Public School and when about nineteen, applied for and received a teacher's certificate, after which I taught for three terms in the district school of this county, and having learned music under my father's instruction, also gave lessons on the organ, piano and guitar. My mother having died when I was about four years old, I early learned to rely on myself and do housekeeping, sewing and to care for and attend to my little brother who was two years younger than I. My life passed quietly and uneventfully until the discovery of Tonopah by Jim Butler and his wife in the fall of 1900, which threw everyone into a frenzy of excitement. Many rushed from Belmont to the new El Dorado, amongst whom was my brother, who left the last of December to cook for the "Company" men, as we called the miners employed by Butler, Brougner and Oddie.

At this time I began getting very discontented and tired of doing nothing, and of the dreary monotony of life in Belmont, and thought how adventuresome and exciting life must be in a new camp, and as my brother was cooking for ten or twelve men, I thought I could do as well as he, and he could do something else. So I determined to try it, and sent for a tent 14 by 18 feet, some cooking utensils, dishes, etc., enough for about fifteen people, and I thought that together with the dishes belonging to the "Company", I could manage for twenty at the very most, though I never expected to cook for any more. They had nothing to cook on but a sheet iron camp stove and I could not get a decent cookstove anywhere around Belmont, so I got an old No. 7, thinking I could order one after I reached Tonopah. My friends and acquaintances thought I was surely crazy and tried to discourage and scare me out, but I did not scare worth a cent, and the more they talked the more I was determined to go as Messrs. Butler, Brougner, Oddie encouraged me and promised to help me in every way. There were no women yet in Tonopah and only about seventy men, and people said it was already beginning to be a tough camp. Mrs. Butler, accompanied by her husband, arrived in Tonopah a few days before I did and another lady, Mrs. Grieves and her daughter had arrived even before. I left Belmont on the 25th of

January 1901, with my brother, Harry, who came for me, and arrived at Mr. and Mrs. Butler's tent, where they camped two miles from town on the 28th.

I remained with them until next morning when they and I walking [sic.] into town, arrived at "New Belmont," (which name had been given to where Butler's men lived and who were all Belmont fellows) where my brother and the young lady who had previously arrived and whom I engaged to help me in my work were busily engaged in putting the noonday meal on the table. I thought I had never seen such a horrid place as that tent was, everything was so crowded, dusty, and dirty, and the water wagon had failed to get into camp before dinner-time. My "white" dishes were put to immediate use, as was also my table and new white oil-cloth, and my brother set me to work immediately. When all the men came in from work, great was their surprise and delight to find a decent table at which they would sit down together without discomfort, and the white wishes [sic. -*dishes*] --how they enjoyed eating out of them, for they had used tin ones before.

The appearance and condition of things was not very reassuring to one so inexperienced, as I had never before been in a tent, nor camped out, nor had I done much cooking, so I was somewhat discouraged at the outset, but having always had good health and made up my mind to expect hardships and endure them. Mr. Butler had given me a corner lot on Main street and my brother had one adjoining on which we intended to have our "boarding house," but Mr. Butler told me that Mr. W. Brougher had intended from the first to keep the corner which included out lots for his own use, so he picked out another place on what is now the corner of Mineral street and Brougher avenue, and on the road to the mines and which he thought would be more appropriate place for me and my business. I was also somewhat afraid to be so near the only saloon in the place, which, of course, was the favorite lounging place for all of the men, for we could not know what kind of men might drift into a new place like this. We gave up our lots on Mineral Street, which you may be sure we afterwards regretted, as now they are worth \$2,000 or more. Having bought "The Company's" 14 by 16 feet tent, cooking utensils, tin dishes, etc., we moved from the mines, down into town on the afternoon of January 31st. Mr. Butler kindly gave permission to all of any of his men to "lay off" work that afternoon to help us and also move their own tents and belongings, (all of which composed "New Belmont") for they laughingly declared they must follow the "Soup House" wherever it went; so we all got settled on adjoining lots before dark. On the preceding day Harry managed by the greatest effort to procure timber enough to put up a frame with flooring over which we stretched one of

the tents to use for a dining room, the other we just “pegged” down, without a frame, for the kitchen and then joined the two. Upon my arrival the report had spread that a “boarding-house” was to start and men hurried to us and begged to be taken as boarders at once, so as to be sure to commencing on the 1st of February, (the next day). I objected strongly to taking new borders till we got “straightened” around, but they begged and insisted so hard, saying they “would stand around and take a ‘handout’ and put up with anything rather than cook outside and eat on a box,” that we gave in and let them come. That night at supper there were thirty men instead of about fifteen as Miss Grieves and I had calculated upon, but, fortunately, I had cooked up a kettleful each of beans and sauerkraut that forenoon and then we made biscuit and fried steak and managed to “fill them up.” The boys had to fix the tents up in such a hurry that the cold wind seemed to blow right through the dining room without stopping at all, and the men had a great time trying to keep the two lamps burning during the meal, but they were all good natured and seemed well pleased with the first supper.

On the 1st or 2nd of February, I've forgotten which, it began to snow and blow so furiously that within a few days the snow was three feet on a level and piled up behind out kitchen for five or six feet. No one was prepared for any cold weather and snow and we had not had time to get in our supply of wood and everyone began to run out of fuel. It stormed incessantly and we all began to feel pretty “blue.” My number of boarders increased to forty, as those who had been cooking for themselves were out of wood and the sagebrush was buried, so they came to me and begged to be taken in and brought me their supply of provisions and dishes. Dishes were so scarce that we used tin, china, agate and “any old thing” we could get hold of. It was so cold in the mornings in the dining tent that the grease which the steak was cooked in would harden the moment the plate was set down on the cold oil cloth and the men would be shivering all the time during the meal. We had a cook stove in one corner of the tent and there was always a good-natured scramble to get seats at the ends of the tables nearest the fire. I never saw such a good-natured crowd of men, not a murmur or dissatisfaction was heard, although there was enough to try the patience of a saint at times, but then it was an unwritten law that the first man to grumble at anything would be kicked out. During the storm no one could work in the mines (as the work was all on the top) except two brothers, Joe and John Nay (the latter by the way was [sic.] in partnership with my brother and I in the boarding house business) who had succeeded in sinking what is now known as the “Company Shaft” down about forty-five feet, and the snow did not interfere with their work. John Nay would work in the mine all day and then help us at

night and in the morning until seven, so he worked harder than any other man in camp.

Nearly all the rest would have to stay in bed to keep warm till they were sure I had breakfast ready and after breakfast when they became tired of walking around endeavoring to keep warm, they would crawl back into bed again. At this time there were only two frame buildings, 12x14 and about eight small tents, in Tonopah. One belonged to Lothrop and Davis of Sodaville, and was their store, and the other was Money and Kendall's saloon. There was a well-beaten path through the snow, across the street to the store and from there to the saloon. These were the only places with fires, around which the men could congregate and when those crowded close around the stoves would get thawed out somewhat, they would step back and let others take their places thus all took turns in getting warm. Many of the men were without overshoes and felt boots, so they made use of some ore sacks which we were keeping at our place for "The Company." They would pull a sack up around each leg and tie it, and then wade through the snow. Around my cook stove stuck in the oven—when it happened to be empty—or hanging on its doors, and under it, in fact, everywhere above and around where they could be put, were frozen gloves and mittens, mufflers, caps, ore sacks, overshoes, felt boots, and sometimes even socks. Both tents were ornamented by ores sacks thawing out on the walls; now was not that a fine conglomeration to wade through and step over when one was in a big hurry trying to cook for forty cold, hungry men? I used to become almost frantic at times, in spite of trying to make the best of things. Everyone pitied me, I suppose from the fact that I was small and slight—not at all robust looking—they thought I must be delicate, but I rather enjoyed it all in spite of the awful hardships and inconvenience of everything.

Mr. Dunlap, one of the leasers, let me have a No. 8 cook stove; it was pretty good, but had no damper and would not bake at all. My No. 7, which I put in the dining tent and which I did all my baking, had a defective damper, which kept falling all the time until I put a little chip in from the outside to hold it. This would soon burn off, however, and another would have to be stuck in. It was funny in the mornings when the men were crowded tightly around the stove trying to keep from freezing [sic.] while waiting for breakfast, and while I had a pan of biscuits or cornbread in the oven, to see one man sit and keep the damper up and watch the biscuits, and another keep the fire burning by breaking up bits of boards from boxes.

The now [sic. –*snow*] lay so ddeep [sic.] that the water boy could not get the team to the spring, three miles distant, so he spent the forenoons melting snow for me in a wash boiler, which I always kept on the back of the stove; but it took so much fire, time and space on the stove to get water in this way that it was a dreadful hinerance to the cooking and eating business.

We got out of wood once and Harry bought a pile from two fellows for \$19. There were just nineteen slender, little, green sticks--of course, cedar—so we paid \$1 a stick for it. We got it chopped up, and not having room enough inside left some of it outside. That night someone crept up and stole an armful of it. Harry and John Nay (who slept on a table in the dining tent, because the floor by night was but frozen snow and mud) heard him as he put each stick on his arm, but in their hurry to get to the door, they knocked the table over, which warned the fellow and he got away without our discovering who the thief was.

A pile of lumber which had been hauled down from Belmont for Wilse Brougner, for the purpose of building a big saloon, was all taken and used for firewood, (all except the flooring,) so one can partly realize in what straits the people were. For awhile every morning, almost every man would ask me, “Well, how is the wood for today, and how's the grub holding out?”

One unusually cold morning, while a regular blizzard was raging and I was frying the steak for breakfast, the stovepipe blew off into the street and a half a dozen men had an awful time getting it up and wiring it to the ridge pole of the tent. There is an adage that “Accidents happen in the best, regulated households,” so I think ours must have been an exceptionally well regulated establishment, for there were more “accidents” than anything else.

The only broom in town belonged to the store and it was in great demand for the saloon, ourselves and I do now [sic.] know who else, would borrow it every day, so the poor little broom did good service. Our feet would almost freeze while standing on and walking over the ice and mud while waiting on the table. By bed-time, Miss Grieves and my shoes would be so wet that during the night they would freeze stiff and next morning we would have to thaw them out before we could put them on. Every night was so cold that frost would come through the canvas of the tent and drop on us, so we had to keep our heads covered during sleep. One night I woke and found my hair and pillow covered with a light snow. Our alarm clock would freeze up and stop, so I put it under my pillow to keep warm. We had so much to do and there were so few of us to do it that we would get up about 4:30 o'clock in the morning and not get to bed

until eleven or after at night, and even when I could get to bed I could hardly sleep, for every fierce gust of wind would almost blow the tent over. One awful night I sat up in bed nearly all night, expecting every moment that the ridge pole would break and hit me, or that the tents would blow over. Nearly every morning some tent would be down and its occupants buried in the snow, and all they could do would be to pull the canvas over them to protect themselves from the storm and stay until morning. We could only get lumber enough to make one small table to wash dishes on, so I would set kettles, pans, etc., on the ground and kneel down to dish up the victuals at meal times.

Towards the last of the two weeks that we were snowed in, we ran short of flour and the storekeeper kept borrowing for us from different ones. They were all so good, and willing to divide ever thing they had, but at last flour was almost gone, and we had eaten up the last ham and bacon and they were anticipating a supper on beans, rice and dried peaches, when a team was descried coming laboriously up the canyon through the deep snow. It was loaded with provisions, and you can imagine how delighted everyone was, and this was the first tidings we had had from the outside world. Everybody in the country around was worrying about us all shut up in Tonopah, for the reports had gone around that we were starving and freezing to death; things did look pretty blue and serious for a while and there were many anxious faces to be seen. I think I may say without exaggeration that I had the hardest time of all, for I had had no experience whatever in such work and worried so much when things went wrong, which it seemed to me they were continually doing, that I almost made myself sick from the strain on my nerves, but I suppose it was the excitement which kept me up. They were all very solicitous about my health and afraid I was going to break down or take cold and get sick and told me they could not afford to let me give up. One night I was afraid I was going to get pneumonia. There were no medicines of any kind in the store or anywhere else, but the clerk hurried around and managed to get a little sweet oil and turpentine from some one and the saloon-keeper had just three lemons left, which he brought to me to make hot lemonade with. I got into bed and my brother and Miss Grieves doctored me up and I was all right the next day. We were all so afraid someone would get down with pneumonia from exposure, and thought they most surely die if they did, for there was not a comfortable, warm place in the town and no medicine, not even mustard or hops. I think we all escaped luckily, when I think of all the deaths resulting from pneumonia last winter, when medicines, doctors and comforts were plentiful. Our tents were up against the foot of a hill and one warm day the snow began to melt very rapidly. Miss Grives and I were alone and busy getting the dinner eady[sic. *-ready*], when

before we knew it quite a stream of water was rushing into the kitchen. Miss Grieves took a shovel and tried to stop it, but it was down hill and before Harry game [sic. -came] and could bank up the earth, the water was ankle deep all over the floor and we had to wade through clay mud to serve up the dinner.

The first team that came in did not have provisions enough to last very long, so the men were anxiously awaiting another “grub wagon” as they called it. Well, the next that came in was loaded with whiskey and lumber, as also the next, then along came another with hay and about a dozen sacks of potatoes, which had all frozen on the way, but we had been without potatoes, for so long, the men were glad to get them, so they subsisted mainly upon frozen potatoes for awhile. Teams with provisions were so slow in coming in that we were worse off than during the storm. It seemed all they thought of bringing was whiskey and lumber, and I became so discouraged and disheartened that I would have quit the business if I could, but we could get no one to take it off our hands. We could not get any help, for no one would work under such disadvantages and the men were all dependent on me for a place to eat. They began coming in so fast and food so slow that Harry and I did not know what to do, as there was no other place for them to eat and they would beg so hard, we could not refuse to take them in, although each new boarder increased our trouble and work. Finally I determined not to take in another one, no matter who came or what they said, for I was wearing out from worry and overwork, so Harry wrote out notices and posted them in conspicuous places around town, stating that we could not take any more boarders, but each one said he had not seen the notice and they tried all kinds of tricks to get in for “just one meal.”

One morning everything seemed worse than ever, for we were out of almost everything; there was no meat of any kind in town, we having used the last sardines and canned corned beef there was in the store, the night before for supper. I did not know what in the world I would do for dinner, when just at the last minute a fellow told Harry he could let him have three small sides of bacon; this seemed a God-send, though not nearly enough. The water wagon had been late and I was late with dinner, and the men had all come in and were waiting impatiently—in fact, everything had gone wrong with me that morning, when, to crown all, they said a couple of teams were coming with eight or ten men. I knew there was not enough to eat for all, so Harry hurried over to tell the late arrivals not to come as there was nothing to eat for them, and others told they but they came just the same. Well, I just couldn't keep up any longer, and ran into the cellar and threw myself down on a sack of potatoes and had a good big cry. I didn't care what became of the boarding-house, boarders or anything else.

My brother and Miss Grieves finished frying the bacon and got the dinner on the table in some way, and I soon got over my “spell” and tried to make the best of it.

There were over eighty by this time, to eat in a tent 16 x 14 feet, and we were so crowded and short of dishes, and Miss Grieves and I were so overworked that we knew we should soon give out. We tried hard to get a cook, but it took so long to get an answer to a letter written to anyone away from Tonopah. One of my boarders was a cook by profession, but he had a good lease and told me he “did not see how in the world I got along; that he wouldn’t undertake to cook for that mob under such circumstances for \$10 a day.” Mr. Brougner and others urged us to get a Chinese cook as they were the only ones who could or would stand the work, but everyone so objected to Chinese cookery—though none disliked them more than I—that we hesitated a long time; but we girls were getting so worn out that finally my brother went to Silver Peak, thirty-five miles away, to get one, and the day he was expected back with “Fong Kee,” there was quite an excitement amongst the men, for there were a few of the latest arrivals, and who had no interests whatever in the town, who made themselves very officious and had more to say than anyone else. They got drunk and excited and influenced others until there was quite a crowd who declared “Chinese should never be allowed to come into Tonopah; the first one should have his queue cut off and be run down the canyon, etc.” The crowd gathered on a hill watching for my brother to come up the canyon and I was so angry and excited I did not know what to do, for the drunken ones were so worked up and excited. It surely would have gone pretty rough with poor old “Fong Kee” had they arrived that night, but fortunately they didn’t come. Some of the crowd came and told me if I would let the chinaman go, they would get a man for \$10 a day and put him into my kitchen to cook, never asking whether it was agreeable to me or not, and their acting in such an impudent manner, (even those we had thought would stand by us and help us out as friends) caused me to get quite angry. After I had expostulated and tried to reason with them, I finally got out of patience and told them (I was going to have a little something to say about my own place and things. That I only wanted the chinaman for a month, for by that time I expected a lady who would manage the business for me and cook, and if the men of the town had no more pity or gratitude for me than not to allow me the chinaman for help for that length of time, after I had nearly killed myself to cook for them, I would close up the place and quit altogether. I told them I would not even make a fire in the morning to cook a bite for any man, if the chinaman was molested in any way. When all saw that I was really in earnest, the agitators quited [sic.] down

immediately, for they knew I had the best of them, as there was not so much as a box of sardines or a cracker left in the store, and neither wood, stoves, dishes nor cooking utensils to be obtained anywhere, while our cellar was well filled with all kinds of groceries, vegetables and beef, which we had received a few days before. The ones who had had nothing to say, thought I was too severe to shut down on all, but I told them to get around and use their influence on the others and make them behave themselves. So when “Fong Kee” arrived, all had quieted down and no more was heard on the “Chinese Question.” After this, for awhile, everything went along quite smoothly, and the meals were always on time. At first, I had a short time in which I got somewhat rested, and oh! what a relief it was to me not to be obliged to get up at four in the morning, and to be relieved of the main responsibility of the cooking! but Miss Grieves had quit on Fong Kee's arrival and we had no one else, so he and I had most of the work to do, though my brother and John Nay waited on table. This was about the 6th of March and as lumber began to be more plentiful, we soon managed to get a dining-room built and got a good large store. We again began letting all come who wanted to, but we soon had the same trouble—they flocked in too fast and Fong Kee could not attend to the cooking as he should, and threatened to leave too, if we did not get some one to help him, so we sent to Hawthorne and got even another chinaman, and this time no objections at all were made. We got along swimmingly after that.

About the middle of March, before we had our dining-room finished, the wind blew terribly for several days, and one day, just as I was setting the tables for dinner in the tent, the wind blew so hard it broke the main scantling which ran along the side, and soon the whole side would have blown in, but a boy and I brace ourselves against the side, and with out [sic. *-our*] utmost strength managed to keep it up till several men came and fixed it. When everything was secure and all right, as they thought, they left and got about half-way across the street, when the ridge pole broke in two, and almost struck me on the head, as I was directly underneath rearranging the tables. The boy who helped me first, braced himself a second time against the door, to keep the whole front of the tent from blowing in, while I ran out the back way to call the men back, and they had a hard time fixing it. Another time shortly after this, while the wind raged terribly, fifteen tents were blown down and torn, amongst them being our kitchen tent. This happened also at dinner time, and it seemed all our accidents happened at that hour. While the men were eating, one of us would stand and hold the pipe on the cook stove to keep it from blowing away, and in spite of our efforts to keep it on, it would slip off the stove, and the whole place would be filled with soot and smoke and ashes. Finally the tent was ripped from top to

bottom in several places, and it scattered and upset everything except the stove, which Fong Kee carefully guarded until he was buried in canvas. So we had to move our kitchen, but got straightened around all right before supper time. About this time my health and strength deserted me, from two month's constant worry and work, I broke down completely, and was sick in bed. My hands and arms seemed to become suddenly paralyzed and cramped the result of carrying heavy dishes while waiting on table. I regained strength so slowly that I could do no more work and my brother and his partner had to run the business without my assistance. My health was almost ruined for I have never been the same since.

People thought we should have made so much money in doing such a rushing business, but we did not, as everything was so hard to get, and when obtained we had to pay two prices for them, and I should have charged more than 50 cents a meal under the circumstances. Then, so many failed to pay their board bills, for we "trusted" by the month and were not strict enough with our debtors. Harry and John Nay had a fourth interest each in a lease from "The Company" and into this we put all our profits from the boarding-house. They both worked in it so long and spent so much time and money without striking anything, that they finally became discouraged and sold out for a small sum to Frank Golden and Billy Sinclair. This is the same lease in which those gentlemen made a fortune last fall. After the boys sold out, Golden and Sinclair sunk the shaft down nineteen feet farther and struck the ledge which has since yielded such quantities of the richest ore in camp and made the owners rich. My efforts in Tonopah to make a fortune have proved futile, but or [sic.] course everyone cannot be fortunate.

It is the pioneers of every place who endure all the hardships and smooth [sic.] and prepare the way for those who come after. I have lived in Tonopah ever since and have been a interested spectator of it's wonderful and rapid growth and can hardly realize it to be the same struggling little camp to which I came on the 28th of January 1901, to open its first boarding house. Last January I was married to Mr. John Nay, my brother's former partner and have since remained a resident of Tonopah. My closing remarks are, long life to Tonopah, and long life, success, and happiness to its generous, open hearted discoverers, Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Butler.

Mrs. J. E. Nay
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