



Captivity of the Oatman Girls: Being an Interesting Narrative of Life among the Apache and Mohave Indians

Royal B. Stratton

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A dramatic true story of captivity on the American frontier.

In 1851, on route to California in a covered wagon, the Oatman family was brutally attacked by Apache Indians. Six family members were murdered on sight, one boy was left for dead, who escaped afterward, and two young girls, Mary Ann and Olive, were taken captive.

Mary Ann, the younger of the two girls, died of starvation in 1852. Olive, however, spent five years in captivity before an incredible rescue. In 1856, she was discovered living among the Mohave tribe, and a ransom was offered in exchange for her release. After years of slavery and bearing a prominent blue tattoo traditional to the Mohave people on her face, Olive was restored to her only living family member, Lorenzo Oatman, the brother who survived.

This book was originally commissioned by Lorenzo Oatman as a factual record of his sisters' fates, based on true events. The story is one of tragedy and loss, at times fascinating and also horrifying. This edition includes illustrations and Olive's own observations about the customs of her captors and the geography of the land. The dramatic yet somber words of Lorenzo and Olive, as recorded by Royal B. Stratton, bring readers into the thrilling immediacy of the Apache attack, Lorenzo's escape, the tragic moment when Olive watches Mary Ann die, and most importantly into the final, happy rescue as Olive is reunited with her brother.

Captivity of the Oatman Girls: Being an Interesting Narrative of Life among the Apache and Mohave Indians Details

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From Reader Review Captivity of the Oatman Girls: Being an Interesting Narrative of Life among the Apache and Mohave Indians for online ebook

Erin Lindsay McCabe says

I really wanted to read this account, supposedly recounted by Olive Oatman herself, to get a sense of how she described her captivity. There is some of that here, but unfortunately in between, Royal B. Stratton inserts his own (verbose) opinion of the American Indians. This is predictably exaggerated and skewed and inaccurate. I suppose this shouldn't have surprised me, but I was still disappointed. Likewise, it's clear that, given both the sentiments of the time and of her co-authors, there's just no way to know what Olive really thought or felt about her captivity-- if she even still viewed it that way at the end. What we know from accounts of her behavior afterward is that she must have been very conflicted and must have had real regard for at least some of the people she'd lived with during those 5 years. I wish there were some way to know *that* story. I guess what I'm saying is this account raises more questions than it addresses about Olive herself and is mostly useful if you want an understanding of the way many viewed the American Indians during the 1850s.

Jimmy Lee says

There are plenty of books about Native American captives during the western expansion. White children were taken and kept alive during this period of our history for a variety of reasons, and we're lucky to have quite a bit of documentation about their lives. This, however, is truly one of the books I could have skipped instead of mistakenly purchasing sight unseen.

I've read many contemporary works, but the writing in this at times was unintelligible. With commas and semicolons tossed at random, I was regularly rereading sentences to find the subject. Here's a sample: "It is true that less of barbarity had marked the few days of their dependence upon their new owners, than their Apache hardships; but they had sadly learned already that under friendly guises, their possible treachery might be wrapping and nursing some foul and murderous doings."

The author indicated, repeatedly, that there is "much that could be written but would swell this book beyond due bounds." More details would have been helpful - why, for example, the families were traveling slower and slower, in increasingly smaller numbers, through known hostile Apache territory - so many mistakes that clearly resulted in heartbreak. And a clear explanation of the family members and their relationships, which I had to get from Wikipedia.

In short, I found no narrative of factual value from the book - the author had no insight to add other than comment in every chapter "let the mind of the reader pause and ponder on the situation of the forlorn." For those who are familiar with old west narratives, reading McGlashen's Donnor Party Tragedy was better than this. (Admittedly, McGlashen rarely allowed us to ponder - he gave us hysterical detail.) Without even a preface to add insight, Wikipedia gave me better information.

Kitty Bachman says

It was interesting how this author depicted the Mohave as not being compassionate towards Olive and in "The Blue Tattoo" Olive had a very good relationship with them. I feel the author Royal B. Stratton was out to make money off of Olive's story.

Doug Hocking says

The information in this book is essential. This is the true story of the Oatman family. Unfortunately, it is written in a cumbersome 19th century style by a writer with little skill and a great deal of wind.

Iweeding says

Book too long on my list of reading...

Ernest Hogan says

The first accounting of a real clash of cultures, though the author's agenda intrudes into the primary source narratives. The conclusion, justifying genocide, is just as disturbing as anything the Indians are reported as doing to their captives. Maybe it's more disturbing, since it's seen as part of the process of "civilization."

Darrell says

"Just as the sun was gladdening the clear west, and throwing its golden farewells upon the innumerable peaks that stretched into a forest of mountains gradually rising until they seemed to lean against the sun clad shoulders of the Rocky Range, imparadising the whole plain and mountain country in its radiant embrace, [etc., etc.]" (page 2)

Captivity of the Oatman Girls: Being an Interesting Narrative of Life Among the Apache and Mohave Indians by R. B. Stratton was originally published in 1857 and it was a best seller for its time. Something I love about reading books from earlier eras is the different language they used back then. This book hits you with a lot of flowery language at the outset, however, Stratton doesn't try as hard as the book progresses. A large part of the book is comprised of extensive quotations from the surviving Oatmans, Olive and Lorenzo. It was nice to hear most of the story in the survivors' own words.

Another common practice from back when this book was written is quoting without providing the source of the quote. Without the help of Google, I'd never know that a couple great lines of poetry quoted by Stratton were from "Lays of Women" by Mrs. Cornwell Baron Wilson and "Of Truth in Things False" by Martin Farquhar Tupper. Also common to the time period is very long chapter headings which give away spoilers for everything that will happen later in that chapter.

Something I don't like about books written in earlier eras is the racism, and this book is chock full of it. We're told "Mexicans are an imbecile, frail, cowardly, and fast declining race" (page 19). Apache are likened to an infestation and various other Native American tribes are denigrated throughout. Since the book is about a family being massacred by Apache with two of the girls being kept as slaves for five years, the racism is

understandable, but it's still unfortunate. The book at least acknowledges that whites can act just as savagely in the conclusion.

We start our story with the patriarch of the Oatman family, Roys. He never seemed to be satisfied staying in one place. He supported his family both by physical labor and as a school teacher. However, he injured his back once while digging a well for a neighbor and never fully recovered. He kept doing physical labor even though it was extremely painful for him, especially when it was cold.

Eventually, he meets a group of families intending to travel to California in order to create a utopian society free from prejudice, pride, arrogance, and caste. (The book doesn't tell us this, but they're a splinter Mormon group known as the Brewsterites.) He decides to go with them because he likes their ideals, but also because he hopes the climate will be easier on his injury. His innate wanderlust probably played a part as well.

We aren't told much about his wife, Mary Ann, other than she was pious and devoted to her husband. Also, while we're given the names of the other family patriarchs going on the journey, we aren't told the names of their wives. Because, you know, this was published in 1857.

"Mutual perils and mutual adventures have a power to cement worthy hearts that is not found in unmingled prosperity." (page 9)

The party encounter several hardships on their journey including hostile Indians, mountain fever, rough terrain, and extreme conditions. It's not all depressing, though. A couple humorous interludes are recounted. At one point in the journey, a "Mrs. M." makes dumplings and hides them in her wagon, however a certain "Mr. A. P." sees where they are hidden.

"Now this A. P. had started out sick, and since his restoration had been constantly beleaguered by one of those dubious blessings, common as vultures upon the plains, a voracious appetite, an appetite that, like the grave, was constantly receiving yet never found a place to say, 'Enough.' [...] He deliberately emptied almost the entire contents of this huge dumpling pan into his ever-craving interior." (page 14)

When Mrs. M. discovers what he did, she "seized a stake, and thoroughly caned him through the camp, until dumpling strength was low, very low in the market."

In another humorous interlude, Mrs. M. falls into a covered up well and there's another point at which two grown men run away from their own children, supposing them "Injins." I don't think any of would necessarily be considered funny by today's standards, but it gives an insight into the time period.

The party ends up splitting up due to a disagreement. The families that traveled with the Oatmans stay for a time in a Mexican village where the Mexicans implore them not to leave, fearing Indian attack. Some of the families stay, while others continue on to a Pimole village. Some more families decide to stay here and the Oatman family ends up proceeding by themselves.

"Though no pleasant task to bring this sad after part to the notice of the reader, it is nevertheless a tale that may be interesting for him to ponder; and instructive, as affording matter for the employment of reflection, and instituting a heartier sympathy with those upon whose life the clouds and pangs of severe reverses and misfortunes have rested." (page 10)

to have a presentiment of what's about to happen: "There seemed to be a dark picture hung up before him, upon which the eye of his thought rested with a monomaniac intensity; and written thereon he seemed to behold a sad after part for himself, as if some terrible event had loomed suddenly upon the field of his mental vision, and though unprophesized and unheralded by any palpable notice, yet gradually wrapping its fold about him, and coming in, as it were, to fill his cup of anguish to the brim." (page 30)

The Apaches appear the next day and act friendly at first, then "suddenly, as a clap of thunder from a clear sky (p.35)" they attack, killing most of the Oatmans. They take Olive and her little sister Mary Ann captive and leave the fourteen-year-old Lorenzo for dead. After being clubbed in the head, Lorenzo was unable to move, unable to see, and thought himself dead. He had a remarkable near death experience:

"There seemed a light spot directly over my head, which was gradually growing smaller, dwindling to a point. During this time I was conscious of emotions and thoughts peculiar and singular, aside from their relation to the horrors about me. At one time (and it seemed hours) I was ranging through undefined, open space, with paintings and pictures of all imaginable sizes and shapes hung about me, as if at an immense distance, and suspended upon walls of ether. At another, strange and discordant sounds would grate on my ear, so unlike any that my ear ever caught, that it would be useless endeavoring to give a description of them. Then these would gradually die away, and there rolled upon my ear such strains of sweet music as completely ravished all my thoughts, and I was perfectly happy. And in all this I could not define myself; I knew not who I was, save that I knew, or supposed I knew, I had come from some far-off region, only a faint remembrance of which was borne along with me. But to attempt to depict all of what seemed a strange, actual experience, and that I now know to have been crowded into a few hours, would only excite ridicule; though there was something so fascinating and absorbing to my engaged mind that I frequently long to reproduce its unearthly music and sights. (p.38)"

When he came to, he thought he was blindfolded, but it turned out his eyelids were closed by clotted blood. Being partly delirious, he thought his brain was loose and rattling about in his head. He sees old friends and calls to them for help. As he makes his way back to the Pimole village, coyotes and gray wolves (he calls them "unprincipled gormandizers (p.42)") try to eat him. He grows so hungry, he considers eating the flesh from his own arm.

Olive, meanwhile, decides not to commit suicide for her sister's sake. She's taken on a long march to the Apache village where she is made a slave. Olive shows a sense of humor in her recounting: "The breakfast was served up, consisting of beef, burned dough, and beans, instead of beans, burned dough, and beef, as usual (p.55)" She also says the Apache seemed to live in a constant state of fear for their own personal safety. Olive and Mary Ann eventually become jaded to their ill-treatment. "Indeed, indifference is the last retreat of desperation (p.56)."

After a year, the Apache sell her to the Mohave. Olive and Mary Ann are treated better here. They are taken into the household of the chief, Espaniole and are treated well by his wife, Aespaneo, and daughter, Topeka. They're even given land to farm for themselves. Olive describes them as still being treated as slaves and claims the distinctive blue chin tattoo she received (the Ki-e-chook) was to mark her as a slave (According to Wikipedia, the tattoo more likely meant she was a member of their tribe).

Mary Ann, 7 years old when captured, is described as being the favorite child of the family, quickest to learn, but often sick. We're told she read the Bible at five and half years of age. She dies during a famine along with several of the Mohave and Olive is left alone.

At one point, the Mohaves take Cochopa captives, including a 25-year-old woman named Nowereha. She escapes, but is recaptured. As punishment for trying to escape, the Mohave crucify her, including tying her head with pieces of bark stuck with thorns and nailing her hands and feet to a crossbeam. They leave her like this for a while, then shot her full of arrows, mocking her the whole time. After seeing this, Olive gives up

any thought of trying to escape, although she was eventually rescued.

I liked many details of daily life that are thrown in. The Apache make fire using flint and wild cotton. The Mohave have an autumn feast with food consisting of "wheat, corn, pumpkins, beans, etc. These were boiled, and portions of them mixed with ground seed, such as serececa, (seed of a weed) moeroco (of pumpkins.) On the day of the feast the Indians masked themselves, some with bark, some with paint, some with skins (p.93)."

In another part, Olive gathers leka, a small ground-nut the size of the hazelnut. I liked a bit where they look for a streak on the mountain where trees don't grow because this indicates a river might be there.

I loved a lot of the lines in this book such as "We were lengthening out a toilsome journey for an object and destination quite foreign to the one that had pushed us upon the wild scheme at first (p.24)."

Blood rushing to someone's face is described as "his face would burn and flash as it crimsoned with the tide from within (p.33)." A dirt floor is called "a floor made when all terra firma was created (p.73)." When a cake is divided, the biggest piece is called "the Benjamin portion." False tales are called "India rubber stories."

Wikipedia doubts the truthfulness of this account, which leaves me wondering how much of it is true and how much isn't. The group called Apaches may have been a different tribe altogether, and the Mohave may have treated Olive better than she recounts. She may have even married a Mohave and given birth to two boys. So this is definitely a book to take with a grain of salt.

Katie says

Was drawn to this story because a character on the tv show Hell On Wheels was loosely based on Olive Oatman. "Four blankets and a horse" will sound familiar to those who watched the show. It was an interesting read, but I feel like there could have been more, but I guess it was normal literature for its time?

Lisa says

This is the memoir of a young girl facing and surviving unimaginably grievous circumstances, and except for some of the hyperbolic language of the times, which is a little hard to follow (flowery language, run-on sentences, and so forth), I thought it was both heart-wrenching and fascinating. If you are interested in this period of history or similar events, the book is a worthwhile read. That said, apparently one should take it with a grain of salt and do further research into the Oatman girls' captivity as other authors have written about it differently than Stratton portrays it. One thing upon which everyone can agree: the mid-1800's were brutal times to live in and survive.

Angel says

Olive Oatman and her younger sister were young Mormon girls that were captured by Apache Indians and

later given to the Mohaves. Olive is strong and is the first recorded woman that is tattooed by her tribe. In her narrative, she speaks of the good and the bad of living with Indians and eventually becoming part of the tribe. Eventually, she is reunited with her brother whom she thought was dead and is traded back to her white civilization. After her ordeal of 5 years in captivity, she narrates this book along with going on a US tour of telling her story.

While this is supposed to be a personal narrative, the author, Stratton, filters out any reference to her religion and in fact, her family had left the Mormon church due to her parents decision that Brigham Young was not the prophet and that they should venture to CA instead. This story takes on a very non denominational Christian feel so that possibly more people could relate? It is in the series of Captivity Narratives where Indians were all heathens and white Christians were all god fearing and pious.

For a balanced view of this book, read Emigrant Song by Margot Mifflin.

Muriel says

I am currently near the area where this event happened. This book was originally written in 1857, and that would explain the writing style, which can be a little difficult to read at times. It can be pretty wordy and pious, and the native peoples are portrayed as horrible heathens, and there is much attempt made to preserve the chastity of the girls. This would be pretty important in the mid 1800's. I found the book interesting to read for the historical details of the massacre and the captivities, and just glossed over the obvious bias of the times toward the 'degraded savages'..

Katherine Basto says

This book, although somewhat informative, was a challenge to read. The author left out many critical details in the narrative such as the fact the Oatman family were Mormons and neglected to give background information and historical context.

The narrative switches constantly from Royal Stratton's writing to the words of Olive Oatman. This can get confusing at times because the tense changes and often the reader is unaware this is happening. The author's biased racism comes through as well, and typical of some 19th century style writing, he describes the "savages" in rather overblown, florid writing that gets a bit redundant. Also, the descriptions such as food sources can continue on for several paragraphs.

Although this book has quite a bit of information and the Reverend Stratton has Olive and Lorenzo's quotes throughout, I believe there are other books on the subject that are more objective, thorough, comprehensive and less biased.

Faye says

WOW. Do you believe white Christians are the possessors of all virtue and aboriginals are lazy, savage, and useless? Unless you do, you will be highly uncomfortable with this eloquently written piece of racist crap. Normally, one sympathizes with the captives, but I found it impossible in this case. Sure, the narrators have some reasons for being so hateful, but this reads like the anti-Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West. My library's description says "this incredible account of love, perseverance,

and determination will thrill any adventure fan, while also appealing to historians and students of Native American culture." NOT! The only appeal this book has is as an shameful description of "what were they thinking?" back in the bad old days. Any students of Native American culture would be horrified to find these insults continue to exist in a modern repository of information and learning without a large-font disclaimer. If there was to be an audio-book burning at my library, I would throw this one at the top of the heap.

Tom says

Certainly this is a tragic and true story. The young Oatman family with seven children are moving by themselves across New Mexico in 1850 toward Fort Yuma and are attacked by small band of Yavapais Apaches. Seven of the family are left for dead, although a teenage boy survives and two young girls are taken captive. Five years later the older of the two captive girls, now 18 or 19, is released and her story becomes news and with the aid of R. B. Stratton a book is produced. As written by the author the story is leaden, wordy, novelized and racist. Exceptions are with the brief sections provided by Lorenzo (the surviving Oatman youth) and Olive Oatman's description of her life as a slave with the Indian bands. These two young people provide good clear testimony without the flowery wordsmithing that the author seemed to feel was required.

There are other books on the very tragic story. Pick one of those.

Sherry says

The writing style was a bit difficult because of when it was written.

The story itself was very sad

For those who say it makes American Indians look bad, remember who wrote this, the time period and for goodness sakes....what these two LITTLE girls went through!
