



Polly and Charlie Bemis

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Polly Bemis was born near Beijing, formally known as Peking during her time, in 1853 in the northern reaches of China. As famine stripped the provinces of food, Polly's family fell on hard times and traveled south. In 1869, Polly's father exchanged his daughter for money to buy seed in order to save the remaining family members (Elsensoln, 1987: 16-18). In 1871, with two other young Chinese girls, she was sent to the United States from Hong Kong on a sailing ship (Idaho Statesman, 1924, reprinted 7-8-1954). Polly was eighteen when she landed in San Francisco harbor. An old woman smuggled her up to Portland where she was sold to a Chinese resident of Warren for \$2,500. The buyer hired another Chinese man to bring her by pack train to Warren; they arrived in Warren on July 8, 1872 (Gizycka 1923). Upon arrival Polly received her American name when she dismounted from her horse, a stranger proclaimed, "Here's Polly" (Wegars, 2003: 2).

C.J. Czizek, former State Mine Inspector and manager for the Little Giant Mine in the Warren Mining District (Idaho County Free Press 1919:p.1), was a friend and resident in Polly Bemis' boarding house in Warren. In a 1933 interview by The Idaho Statesman, Czizek said he first met Polly 45 years previously. "At that time (in the 1870s)," he said, "there were about 1500 white men and 1500 Chinese working in the mines and but one white woman, a Mrs. Johnson. 'Big Jim' an exceedingly tall handsome Chinaman, was the leader of the Chinese colony... He managed all their affairs. He always dressed in elegant brocaded silk robes and wore a mandarin cap with a scarlet button on the top. He brought half a dozen Chinese women to the camp." Polly Bemis was one of these women.

It was in Warren that Polly met Charles A. Bemis, the son of Alfred Bemis for whom Bemis Point, once the richest property in Warren, is named. Czizek said, "The younger Bemis was a jeweler in a Connecticut town and his father persuaded him to come out to the camp. The easterner fell for Polly at once and they became great friends" (The Idaho Statesman, September 24, 1933). Czizek also declared that Polly was not a poker bride as was widely believed.

Charles became involved in the saloon business early in life and by 1880 owned a saloon in Warren. Polly's name first appears in the Warren census in 1880 (the census lists her place of birth as Peking, her age as 27). She is recorded as living in the same residence as Charles Bemis. Her occupation is listed as "housekeeping" (U.S. Census, Washington (Warrens) Precinct, Idaho County, Idaho Territory).

Other newspaper reports compiled in The Warren Times give brief glimpses into the life of Polly and Charles. In 1887, the Bemis' house burned in a fire and all but some gold dust and coins were lost. In 1889, Charlie was the deputy sheriff in Warren. Also, during that year on July 4th he raced his horse, Dash, twice and lost. Charlie Bemis was shot in the face in during a gambling brawl in September 16, 1890. The bullet missed his eye, but shattered his cheek. A doctor traveled from Grangeville to treat Charlie, but he was in bad condition and in danger of dying from his wounds. When the doctor gave up on him Polly nursed him back to health.

In 1893, the couple bought a mining claim near the Salmon River, 18 miles from Warren. Charles A. Bemis and Polly were married on August 13, 1894. Herb McDowell, a Warren resident recalled that every summer they would come to town to visit and sell their produce (McDowell 1987:2). They grew a large variety of fruits and vegetables including apples, cherries, peaches, gooseberries, corn, peas, potatoes, and much more. They would also sell extra produce to people who floated down the river. Charlie hunted grouse, deer, and bear while Polly would save warms found in the garden for catching trout.

In 1904, a devastating fire burned the business district of Warren taking with it several buildings owned by Charlie Bemis, including the saloon.

The Bemis's went on to become legends in the Salmon River country. Tales of their adventures and lifestyles spread on the river. Some of which told about Charlie catching a young mountain lion and raising it as a pet. Charlie nailed a tin plate to the table so the cougar could eat with them (Wegars, 2003: 7).

In 1922, Charlie and Polly's house caught on fire. They both escaped and stayed with close neighbors, Charlie Shepp and Pete Klinkhammer across the river. Shortly after, Charlie Bemis passed away on October 22, 1922. After Charlie's death, Polly stayed in a log house in Warren while Shepp and Klinkhammer built her a new log cabin on the Salmon river. She lived there for ten more years with the help of Shepp and Klinkhammer looking on her and planting her garden each spring. On November 6, 1933 Polly Bemis died in Grangeville after recovering from a stroke. Later, in 1987 in celebration of her life Polly's log cabin was restored and made a museum. Both Polly and Charlie Bemis will be remembered as possessing the spirit of adventure and tenacity required in the early days of the Idaho frontier.