

San Rafael Desert living was challenge

By ARVA SMITH
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As a young, newly-arrived, French-speaking, "mail order" bride 65 years ago at a San Rafael Desert outpost, Marie Ribail Motte did not understand what the two men who came to her door were saying.

Resorting to sign language, she held out a coffee pot and that seemed to meet with their approval. Sensing she was on the right track she held out a frying pan and then bacon and eggs.

They responded with "yes" and "ok" and nods of approval to each thing she showed them although they seemed surprised at seeing a woman at the trading post frequented by cattlemen, sheepmen and men travelling between Green River and Hanksville.

They seemed to like the breakfast Marie cooked and served them, especially the marmalade that she had made from dried apricots. They each left \$1 and continued on their way.

When Marie's husband, Othon Motte, and his brothers, Eugene, Joe and Louis, who were farming and ranching in the San Rafael as well as operating a post office and selling supplies and meals and lodging, returned, she asked, "How did I do?"

They congratulated her. Travelers usually paid only 50 cents for breakfast, they said.

With that incident, the nineteen-year-old Marie began making the transition from life in the cool, green valley of her girlhood in the Hautes-Alps area of France, near Switzerland, to the hot and sand-swept San Rafael.

That region of France, then and now, was a magnet for vacationers and tourists because of the spectacular mountain scenery and fishing.

She has never been back.

In 1921 she came to the United States to marry a young man

she did not know, although his family was originally from the section of France where she grew up. She traveled alone to the United States to marry Othon Motte after her sister, Elise, the intended bride, backed out.

The story began when the Motte family immigrated to the United States many years earlier.

The Mottes settled in California where Othon, the youngest of the four brothers, was born. Later their mother died and their father took his family back to France where he remarried.

Not liking their stepmother, the four brothers returned alone to America where most of them served in the United States Army during World War I.

Through correspondence arrangements were made for Marie's sister, Elise, who was two years older than Marie, to marry Othon.

Elise was to travel with three other young women who were also coming to the United States to be married. When the girls arrived at the place they intended to meet before going to the train station, Elise said, "You go ahead. Write and tell me what its like." The others left and Elise stayed behind.

Meanwhile Marie had no thought of going to the United States.

She had a sweetheart in France, a young man whom her family and her mother did not like.

Finally, mostly to please her mother, she told the young man goodbye.

With the end of Marie's romance, her sister, Elise, showed an interest in that young man. Soon Elise and he were married.

Marie said, "You took mine and I will take yours."

Although her sister knew Othon during the short time he was in France, Marie had never talked to him

"I saw him once when I was very young, but he would not look at me," she said. "He was looking at my sister."

Her journey to the United States, first by ship to New York and then across the country by train to California, took one month in the spring of 1921. She stayed with relatives in Los Angeles until Othon arrived.

They were married in the San Rock Church.

Although she was accustomed to hard work in France where she began earning her own living at the age of nine by herding cows, tending children and house cleaning for families in neighboring villages, life was harder in the San Rafael where she cooked for as many as 15 men.

The combined effects of the work, the heat, the fact that she had no one to talk with and her first pregnancy caused her weight to drop rapidly from 150 pounds to 106.

In her new home in the desert with its dirt roof and cheesecloth (coarse cotton gauze) ceiling, she baked bread and cooked meals on a wood-burning stove for the men working there and travelers.

Keeping the house clean was not easy because the dirt on the roof sometimes filtered through the ceiling.

Water was carried from an outside cistern — the cistern collected rainwater that swept down a large, nearby, gully — for cooking, drinking and to be heated on the stove for doing the laundry.

Sometimes there were floods and everyone left the house, after strengthening the roof as much as possible, to sleep in tents on higher ground.

Along with other chores, she killed chickens and cleaned and cooked them for meals and to use for the lunches she packed for farm workers and travelers.

A mystery developed when the cooked chicken began disappearing overnight



Marie Ribail Motte talks with her daughter, Mabel Motte D'Ambrosio, and Muffy, about life at a trading post and

ranch in the San Rafael Desert 25 miles from Green River in the years from 1921-24 and her life before that in France.

pitcher.

Later when she had two small children and moved into Green River for a couple of months in the summer because the heat in the San Rafael was too much for the children, a neighbor invited her to go to church one Sunday.

Coming home after church, she met the neighbor's husband. He said, "This is the lady who turned me down for a drink of water."

One of her most frightening experiences in the San Rafael occurred when a young French bachelor who had been herding sheep and who was alone in the United States, became seriously ill.

He was brought to their station on the way to seeking medical help in Green river.

Having been injured and suffering from a medical problem that prevented his

villages or on farms. Because the mode of transportation was walking, she did not see her family during the summers.

When her father was called to serve in the French army during World War I, her family sent word for her to go to the railroad station near where she was working to bid her goodbye.

Arriving there, she was told by her father that her mother was ill and to go home to help the family.

She returned to the home where she had been working, collected all her belongings, bought a cauliflower because she knew her mother liked them and began walking the long distance home, carrying her clothes and the cauliflower.

Darkness overtook her and

the owls with their big wings and hooting frightened her. It was 10 p.m. and all the lights were out in the village and her house when she got there.

Her mother was crying but thankful that Marie had come home.

Whenever the German soldiers came to their house during the war they took whatever food they could find. "They cleaned us out," Marie said.

To keep food for the family, the Ribails buried it on the mountainside.

"We never had to eat whole wheat bread," she said.

She remembers the schools in France as being strict, and after the age of about eight or nine,

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Mr. and Mrs. Othon Motte on their wedding day.

Marie finally realized that the men who were playing cards in the evening were helping themselves to the chicken.

To make sure that she had chicken when she needed it for the lunches she packed early in the morning, she began keeping the cooked chicken in her bedroom.

Life was also hard for men at San Rafael.

The trip by wagon to Green River for mail and supplies took all day each way.

"My husband said that it was often like making a new road each time he went because of the blowing sand," she said. The wagon was pulled by four or six horses depending on the size of the load to be brought back.

More than 60 years after her three years in the San Rafael, Mrs. Motte, who is now 85, clearly remembers many incidents, some humorous, some sad and a few that were frightening.

A mule once mysteriously disappeared and no one had any idea what had happened to it. Then one day it surfaced in the drinking water cistern.

"That was the end of the drinking water," she said.

Another incident relating to inability to at first understand English occurred.

Andy Moore from Green River, whom she did not know at the time, stopped by the house and asked for a drink of water.

Her reply was, "I don't know."

Finally he made her understand by pointing to the bucket of water and a nearby

blood from clotting, his bleeding could not be stopped and he died at the trading post.

While awaiting arrangements to take the body to Price the next morning for burial in the Price cemetery, his body was placed in a bed.

Mrs. Motte said she was very concerned about what might happen because travelers who stopped late at night frequently went to bed without disturbing anyone.

She was afraid that someone might wake up in the morning to find he had been sleeping with a corpse. It did not happen.

After three years, she told her husband that if they did not leave the San Rafael, that she would return home to France. "My sister would not have stayed here three weeks," she said.

They moved to Price where they bought a farm and established a dairy.

Her daughter, Mable D'Ambrosio, with whom she has been living, said, "My mother continued to work very hard after moving to Price — delivering milk to costumers, selling asparagus, chickens, vegetables, meat and whatever she could."

She once got a broken leg when the dairy delivery horse kicked her.

In raising her family, Mrs. Motte vowed that she would always keep her children with her.

She remembered her homesickness when she was sent during the summers to work for families in other



Some of the cowboys and sheepherders who frequented the ranch for good home cooking stopped for their picture in 1922. They are Henry Dusseir, Sr., Bernard Iriart, Joe Garnier, Sr., Othan Motte, Jona Isagier, Joe Motte, Little Bertrand and Balunda.



Mrs. Motte and her husband, Othon, are on the left in the picture. Othon is holding their baby, Kate. Uncle Joe Motte, Joe Bertrand, Joe Respoe and Joe Nuguirre are also in the picture.



The ranch was basic and bare out in the desert south of Green River. The house is the building in the center of the picture and the four-horse wagon had just arrived from Green River.