

California Joe, A Great Frontiersman



California Joe in the Black Hills



California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman.



California Joe

Nov 1874 -
Red Cloud Agency

Dear sons I received your kind letter yesterday and was glad to hear from you all returned from the Black Hills 10 days ago after having a bit months travel through the prairie country that I have seen for many days it would take me a month to describe it to you so I give you the outlines in short as for gold there is good wages from 5 to 25 dollars per day to good work

in the hold to say to come be more see you and Big come in that but wait to get in time and he if the in me on the if you the yesterday the paper after and good to California

Yours affectionate Father old E. Milner

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON



MONG the tangled briars and weeds of the neglected post cemetery at Fort Robinson, Neb., stands a small, white stone slab which marks the last resting place of a great frontiersman. Yet the inscription on it gives no hint of that fact. It simply says: "Moses Milner—Scout." And that is the epitaph of one of the most picturesque figures in the history of the Old West, a character in the drama of the frontier who is almost as much myth as man.

Back in the days when Ned Buntline, Col. Fretless Ingraham and others of the bang-bang school of literature were turning out their flood of paper-backed dime novels to thrill America's youth, one of their favorite characters was "California Joe," whom they built up as a "mystery man." But the "California Joe" of dime novel fame and the "Moses Milner—Scout" who sleeps in the graveyard at Fort Robinson were one and the same man.

Fortunately for his future fame, a book which has recently been published dispels the myths and legends that have grown up around his name and gives what is evidently the first complete account of his amazing career. That book is "California Joe," written by Joe E. Milner, his grandson, and Earle R. Forrest, and published by the Caxton Printers, Ltd., of Caldwell, Idaho. It is based upon war department records and the personal history of the Milner family and as such is a valuable contribution to authentic literature of the frontier.

"California Joe's" full name was Moses Embree Milner. He was born May 8, 1829, near Stanford, Ky., on the plantation of his father, Embree Armstead Milner, a veteran of the War of 1812, whose father had served in the Revolution. The first Milners in America were two brothers who came from Yorkshire, England, to Virginia, in 1683. From that time on members of the family were restless and westward-faring pioneers, a fact which makes the career of their most famous member, "California Joe," more understandable.

Young Milner grew up in a land where skill with the long rifle was paragraph one, chapter one, in its enforcement of the law of survival of the fittest. So it is not surprising to learn that at the age of twelve he killed his first deer and by the time he was fourteen he was one of the best shots in that part of Kentucky. At this tender age also the wanderlust seized him and the Odyssey of California Joe began.

"One day in August, 1843, he shouldered his Kentucky rifle and, telling his parents that he was going hunting for a few days, started out through the forest. That was the last they saw of their son for five years; and then one day in 1848 he appeared at their new home in Warren county, Missouri, Embree Milner having emigrated to that state because Kentucky was getting too thickly populated to suit him and he wanted a little more elbow room."

In those five years the Kentucky boy grew into efficient frontier manhood almost overnight, as so many of the youngsters of his time seem to have done. Wandering westward he had reached St. Louis, the first city he had ever seen. At that time it was the gateway to the West and headquarters of the fur trade. There he joined a party of trappers en route to Independence where they outfitted themselves for a hunting and trapping trip up the Platte river. The next spring they went to Fort Laramie to sell their peltries to the American Fur company, owners of that post.

At Fort Laramie Milner joined a party of trappers headed by the noted Jim Baker, which was bound for the Yellowstone country. In a battle with Blackfoot Indians the fifteen-year-old boy killed his first Indian—three of them in fact. One of them he shot through the head at a distance of 400 yards, a feat which won from Jim Baker the prediction that "There's a lad who will have a great name on the frontier some day if he keeps on like he did today," a prediction Baker lived to see come true.

Back at Fort Laramie Milner became a hunter for the American Fur company for a year or so. Then he accompanied a party of trappers to Fort Bridger where he became acquainted with its famous owner, Jim Bridger, and entered his employ as a livestock herder. Returning to Fort Laramie in the spring of 1846 Milner found there a letter from his parents telling of their move to Missouri and asking him to come home. So he joined a party of mountain men bound for St. Louis.

At Fort Leavenworth Gen. Stephen W. Kearney was mobilizing his "Army of the West" for service in the war which had been declared against Mexico and when Doniphan's Missouri Mounted Volunteers arrived there in June, 1846, young Milner forgot about returning to his home. With two other trappers he joined the army as packers and teamsters. After serving with Doniphan in Mexico, Milner returned to Missouri and sought out his family in Warren county. But after his experiences in the Far West life in the states seemed tame and he soon set out again on a trading and trapping expedition up the Platte.

Late in November, 1848, he was back in Missouri to spend the winter with his parents, but expecting to start out again the following spring. However, when the Watts family from east Tennessee moved to an adjoining farm and young Milner saw fourteen-year-old Nancy Emma Watts, his plans were changed. They were married on May 8, 1850, his twenty-first birthday, and the next day they set out for a honeymoon trip across the plains to California, lured there, as were so many thousands in 1849-50, by the hope of making their fortune in the gold fields. Because of his experience on the plains, the youthful bridegroom was elected guide of the wagon train which they joined and after a journey of six months they reached the Sacramento valley safely.

Leaving his bride at Sacramento, Milner went at once to the gold fields and during the next two years he accumulated a considerable fortune. Then reports of the fertility of the Oregon country drifted down into California and Milner decided to emigrate there. In 1852 he took up a homestead in what is now Benton county and prepared to settle down as a farmer and stock raiser in the new country.

But again the wanderlust seized the young frontiersman, and within a year he was faring forth upon his career of wandering footloose through all parts of the West which ended only with his death at Fort Robinson in 1876. During these years Nancy Emma Milner, the "patient Penelope" of this American Ulysses, remained on the Oregon ranch, directing its activities and rearing the four sons that had been born to them.

News of gold strikes in eastern Washington and northern Idaho took him there in the summer of 1859 and three years later he was pursuing the golden will-o-the-wisp in Virginia City, Mont. It was in the latter gold camp that he won the sobriquet which he was to make so famous. Asked by a party of miners what his name was he replied that it was Joe and when they asked him where he was from he jokingly answered "From California, where you find the real gold." Then and there he was dubbed "California Joe" and that name stuck to him through the remainder of his life.

he went to Fort Union, N. M., where he met a fellow-Kentuckian, already famous as a scout and Indian fighter. His name was Kit Carson. Milner served as a scout under Carson and fought with him at his famous battle of Adobe Walls in the Texas Panhandle, then after a period of prospecting in Colorado and fighting Apaches in New Mexico he drifted north into Kansas and reached Fort Riley in the fall of 1860.

For the next five years he served as a scout for the troops operating against the hostile Indians in Kansas, Indian Territory and Texas. During this time he made the acquaintance of such border notables as Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, Capt. D. L. Payne, the "Cimarron Scout," served with General Custer as chief of scouts in the Battle of the Washita and the subsequent campaign and rapidly rose to a position of outstanding importance among the frontiersmen of the period.

From Kansas he drifted west again to Nevada and California, then back into Wyoming where he served as guide for the Jenny geological and topographical surveying expedition into the Black Hills. After his return from this expedition he guided a cavalry column sent from Fort Laramie to the Red Cloud agency to hold in check the Sioux who were threatening to go on the warpath because of the invasion of their beloved Pa-sappa (Black Hills) by the miners. From this place Milner wrote the letter to his sons (reproduced above) telling of the richness of the new diggings and urging them to join him there.

Early the next year he was in the Hills and filed a homestead claim on 320 acres on Rapid Creek on which the present Rapid City was later built. In the fall of 1876 he joined the command of Gen. George Crook as a scout and was assigned to the force led by Col. Ronald S. Mackenzie to disarm Red Cloud's Oglalas before they could join the hostiles. He was to have been chief of scouts for Mackenzie in the latter's winter campaign against Dull Knife's Cheyennes but a few days before the expedition set out, on October 29, he was shot down from behind and killed at Fort Robinson by a man named Tom Newcomb with whom he had had some trouble in the Black Hills, and whose life he had once spared.

He was buried on the banks of the White river by Dr. V. T. McGillycuddy, then surgeon with the Second and Third Cavalry regiments in Crook's army, who had known Joe well during the Jenny expedition. Dr. McGillycuddy, who is still living in Berkeley, Calif., declares that California Joe "had no equal as a scout in natural ability, reliability and wide experience over the frontier" and a reading of this new biography of him confirms that opinion.

It also contains the material to upset many a "popular belief" about some of the frontier notables who have been so widely publicized.

Because of Buffalo Bill's reputation as a slayer of bison, there is a widely-accepted idea that he was a wizard with the rifle. He may have been, but there probably has never been a deadlier rifle shot than California Joe with his heavy Sharps, a fact which he demonstrated time after time, both in shooting matches and in Indian battles.

Wild Bill Hickok is famous for the number of men who were victims of his speed and deadly accuracy with the pistol. If California Joe had been given to cutting notches on his gun for every man he had slain, he could have shown a record which would have placed Hickok in the amateur class. This does not mean that Milner was a "killer" in the sense that Wild Bill was. He was peaceable enough until he was "put on." Then he proved himself a "bad man to fool with" as many a man learned to his sorrow—that is, if he lived long enough to be sorry.

Cody and Hickok had many self-appointed press agents to spread their renown, both deserved and undeserved. California Joe had no such first aids to fame. His neglected grave in the post cemetery at Fort Robinson is symbolic of the fact that true greatness is too often "unwept, unhonored and unsung."

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Japanese Women Workers
Quarterly Review, London, contains an article as to conditions among factory workers in Japan. The writer tells of the 1,000 young girls in a cotton-spinning factory near Osaka, who, far from a "sweat-and-martyr" condition, often reported for Japanese women workers, lived in spotless, airy halls with every comfort. They are fed well for 15 sen (5 cents) a day, by a management, who deducts this amount from their wages. For clothes and recreation, the workers spend 20 cents a day.

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