

Occasional Local History Series #2

The Issac and Olive Mann Isbell House, 257 N. Ojai Street, Santa Paula

The property at 257 N. Ojai Street in Santa Paula was the home of Olive Mann Isbell and Isaac Chauncey Isbell, from 1879 to 1900. By that time the couple had already lived full, interesting, and highly notable lives at the center of early California history. Olive Mann Isbell's singular distinction was to be called the "first American schoolteacher in California" in 1846. Her husband Isaac, a physician, served briefly as the Surgeon of the California Battalion the same year. These two California pioneers later settled in Santa Paula and lived out their final years in this home.



Olive Mann and Isaac Chauncey Isbell

Olive Mann was born on August 8, 1824 in Ashtabula County, Ohio to Warner and Amanda Blakeslee Mann. Olive's father was a farmer and taught at the first school in town. The seventh of fifteen children, she obtained her teaching experience by taking turns instructing at the local school with her brothers.

In 1844 Olive married Isaac Chauncey Isbell, a recent graduate of Western Reserve College where he studied medicine. Isaac Isbell was born in 1815 in Ontario County, New York and farmed in Illinois before coming to Ohio. The couple moved to Warren County, Illinois for a brief time where Isaac read John C. Fremont's 1845 *Report of the Exploring Expedition to Oregon and North California*, sparking his strong desire to travel west. In 1846 the couple joined a wagon train, and after six months of hard travel, arrived at Sutter's Fort in the Sacramento Valley on October 1, 1846—only to learn that war had broken out between the United States and Mexico.

Two weeks later they and the other emigrants were told to remain in the Santa Clara Mission, where Olive

started the first American school in California. Seeing the need to provide the restless children with something to do, Olive Isbell, at the age of 23, decided to open a school in one of the Mission outbuildings and began teaching the emigrant and Mission children using the few books they had brought with them.

Isaac Isbell was asked by Col. John C. Fremont to serve as his battalion surgeon. He started out with Fremont, but returned almost immediately, having come down with typhoid pneumonia. After his recovery he continued to serve the nearly 400 people at the Mission attending to their many illnesses.

In the spring of 1847 the Isbells moved to Monterey, where Olive was asked by American Consul Thomas O. Larkin to teach school for three months. A classroom was established in the customhouse building. Her classes were a mix of Spanish and emigrant children. The term lasted from May 1 to August 23, 1847, during which the enrollment grew from 25 to 56 students.

Dr. Isbell and his wife Olive also operated a tavern/hotel in Monterey until the couple moved to near Stockton in October 1847 where they took up cattle ranching. With the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in January 1848, they quickly became involved in the

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gold fever sweeping the area, forming a trading company in partnership with Miwok Indians. It was a successful endeavor, allowing the couple return to Ohio in 1850 with the small fortune of \$59,000. They took up farming near Akron for three years. From Akron they moved to Davenport, Iowa and invested in the banking business until 1857 when they lost everything to an unscrupulous partner.

Texas was the next move, where the couple again tried cattle ranching, but good fortune was not with them once more. When Texas seceded from the Union at the outbreak of Civil War, the Isbells, Union sympathizers, lost their cattle, home and land to the rebels.

The couple returned to California and settled in Ventura in December 1864 after hearing about oil explorations in the area. They opened the American Hotel on Main Street, operating it for eighteen months. In 1865 the Isbells meet Dr. Stephen Peckham, a chemist for the California Petroleum Company, a guest at the hotel. Dr. Isbell was always on the lookout for "get rich" schemes, despite having already won and lost three fortunes over the past twenty-plus years of the couple's marriage. The doctor apparently thought oil would be the source of his next fortune, but it was not to be.

In 1866 the Isbells moved to Ojai, taking up residence in the abandoned Tico adobe, having apparently appealed to the sympathies of Thomas Bard, who give them a place to live. Bard had recently purchased Rancho Ojai for Thomas Scott to explore for oil. Bard was living in a house on Creek Road near Rancho Arnaz where he could monitor his drilling operations on Sulphur Mountain.

In February 1867, Dr. Isbell was returning from visiting a patient when he was thrown from his buggy, breaking both of his legs. During his recovery, the couple stayed with Bard. Olive, known for her excellent cooking, took care of both men. Dr. Isbell, now unable to get around easily, moved to Santa Paula in 1877 where it is said that Bard and a few friends built the couple a house. Olive was 48 years old and Isaac

was 57, and neither were strong enough to start over again after having lost the bulk of their savings. Bard wrote to congress seeking a pension for Isaac's service to the government, but to no avail. John C. Fremont also sent this letter in his behalf, in 1879:

Territory of Arizona, Executive Department, Prescott
Dec. 9, 1879.

I hereby certify that Dr. Isaac C. Isbell, now of Santa Paula, in Ventura County, State of California, was in the year 1846 the Surgeon of the California Battalion which was authorized and received into the service of the United States by Commodore R. F. Stockton then Commanding the US. Land and Naval Forces on the Coast of California; that as such surgeon, he faithfully and usefully fulfilled his duty in the Battalion and did such other surgical and medical duty as was from time to time required of him. And I also certify that Dr. Isbell is further entitled to the favorable consideration of the Government for the reason that at the breaking out of hostilities, he furnished six men of the Battalion with a full equipment in horses, saddles and rifles, and also furnished for the use of the Battalion, three kegs of powder and other needed ammunition. J.C. Fremont, Formerly Lt. Colonel U.S. Army commanding California Battalion. (Andres, 2002: 61)

No appropriation bill was passed, but in the end, the couple did receive a small Mexican pension of \$8 per month. In 1884 the County of Ventura provided the couple with the additional support of \$15 per month.

Apparently Dr. Isbell recovered sufficiently to take on new employment. In 1878 he was appointed city jailer and was responsible for holding the accused murderers of T. Wallace More in the local jail. The following year he was running a buggy express between Santa Paula and Ventura, and it was said that everyone liked Dr. Isbell so greatly that he had no shortage of customers. (*Ventura Free Press*, Nov. 16, 1878; *Ventura Signal*, Feb. 22, 1879)

The Isbells purchased property from Nathan Blanchard and E. L. Bradley under Olive Isbell's name on June 20, 1879 for \$300, including Lots 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 of Block 38 of the Santa Paula Townsite, front-

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ing the west side of Eleventh Street and the east side of Ojai Street. They built a house at the southern end of the block, near Santa Barbara Street.

By 1881 the newspapers were reporting on Dr. Isbell's declining health, noting that Dr. Guiberson had operated on him for an abscess on his liver. Two years later in 1883 the newspapers reported that he was sick again, but was recovering. By 1884 the county was supporting Dr. Isbell, probably for health reasons, and the following year it was reported that he was very feeble, but still able to get out. On January 8, 1886, Dr. Isbell died at the age of 71. (*Ventura Free Press*, Oct. 29, 1881; November 6, 1885; Jan. 8, 1886)

The following year, on Jan. 15, 1887, Olive Isbell sold the southern portion of block 38, where her house stood, to the Southern Pacific Railroad for \$300. She had her house moved to its present location on the northern section of the block facing Ojai Street. She continued to live in her house "surrounded by loquat trees and flowering vines." As a widow, Olive made ends meet on her small pension by taking in boarders. She also sold off other portions of Block 38, retaining only the town-sized lot on which the house sat. As the wife of a physician, Olive knew about nursing and midwifery, which she continued to practice from time to time in Santa Paula.

Olive Isbell died On March 26, 1899, after a brief illness at the age of 74. She was buried in the Santa Paula Cemetery. Attesting to the regard held by the citizens of Santa Paula it was said "to be the most largely attended funeral ever held in Ventura County up to that time." The funeral service in the Presbyterian Church was attended by all the pastors of Santa Paula, along with the Women's Relief Corporation, GAR, Ventura County Pioneer Society and the public school children. (Andres, 2002: 65)

It should also be noted that the Landmarks Club established in the 1880s to restore the California missions and led by Charles Fletcher Lummis, publisher of *The Land of Sunshine* magazine, established a fund to erect a suitable grave marker to honor Olive Mann

Isbell, the first American school teacher in California. She was also honored locally, when the Santa Paula School District named a new grammar school after her in 1925. Today this school is called Isbell Middle School, and is a Ventura County landmark.

On April 2, 1900 Edwn Virden, Santa Paula druggist, purchased the Isbell house from the estate of Olive Isbell. It is uncertain if the Virden family ever lived in the house, as city directories indicate he also owned a residence on Main Street. The Isbell house was probably rented.

Huerta Family

Around 1923 Cesario Guzman Huerta purchased the Isbell house and property. Huerta was born in Mexico in 1894 and came to California in 1902 from Texas. Huerta married Delores Marcus and the couple raised four children in the house. Julia was born in 1919; Beatrice in 1921; Cesario, Jr. in 1923, and Virginia in 1927.

In later years, after the death of their parents, Julia and Beatrice Huerta lived in the house. Beatrice worked as an office manager for the Methodist Church and also was the church organist, sang in the choir, and worked as a bookkeeper. Julia worked in private schools as an instructional aid. She died in 2005.

Description of Residence

The tall gable-roofed one-and-a-half-story portion of the house has a rectangular plan with a one-story low hipped roof portion across the front. The overhanging eaves are open. The recessed arched entry is flanked by a band of four multi-paned windows on each side. Three concrete steps with a wrought iron railing lead up to the centrally placed entry. Windows are wood multi-paned double-hung or casement with wood mouldings. The second floor front elevation contains three multi-paned windows symmetrically placed. The rear of the house has two one-story wings. A gabled dormer window is located on the east portion of the two-story roof. The house is covered with stucco siding.

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The original portion of the late 1870s house is the two-story section. Early photos show it having a centered front porch with a hipped roof, wood railing and two square post supports. The house was originally covered with wide horizontal drop siding and had large six-over-six multi-paned wood windows. It also had a one story wing on the rear. After it was moved from its original location, it was placed lengthwise on the lot. Sometime between 1903 and 1912 it was turned sideways so that the long portion faced the street.

The house was altered again between 1923 and 1929. The small porch was replaced by the larger, one story addition, and another addition was made to the rear of the house. The original windows were replaced with slightly smaller multi-paned wood windows and the wood was stuccoed over. Another house was moved to the rear of the property between 1923 and 1929 from the Santa Paula High School site at Jones Field.

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