

Sent by Rena Tucker - Dad's 1st Cousin
Rose's daughter

Arin Hugg

"She bears dreadful wounds upon her person," a United States census taker in Tucson noted of Larcena Pennington Page in the summer of 1860. But the wonder was not so much her wounds as that this striking young woman had survived an Apache attack and an ordeal in the Arizona mountains in March of that year, an ordeal that was later described as a "desperate and almost incredible adventure."

The Penningtons were the first family of United States citizenship to settle in Arizona. Larcena, oldest of the 12 Pennington children, added another first when she and John Hemstead Page became the first couple of U.S. citizenship to be married in Tucson. But of all the Pennington lore, published in numerous accounts, most notable is the story of Larcena's capture and 16-day struggle in the Santa Rita Mountains of southern Arizona along with the 10 eventful years that were to follow.

Larcena's story began in 1837 in Tennessee where she and a brother and sister were born to Elias and Julia Pennington, originally of the Carolinas. After five years in Tennessee, the family moved on to Texas where they lived for 15 years. There the rest of the dozen children were born, three more boys and six more girls. There, too, their mother died in 1857. That same year, the restless Elias and his children joined a wagon train bound for California.

Exhausted cattle and Larcena's illness — "mountain fever" — forced the family to stop at Fort Buchanan near Tubac, a fateful decision, for from that moment the Pennington destinies were to be linked with Arizona. During their two years at the fort, Elias and his sons supported the family by whipsawing logs, while the girls helped out by sewing for Army wives. By December of 1859, Larcena had met and married lumberman John Page, and the saga of her early married years began.

Three months after their wedding, the couple had to face a time of separation. John was employed by William Kirkland in the Santa Rita Mountains. Determined to be reunited with his bride, John arranged to have her join him and frontiersman William Randall at their lumber camp in Madera Canyon. Also joining the group was Mercedes Sais Quiroz, an 11-year-old Mexican girl, the ward of Kirkland, who was eager to have her tutored by Larcena.

One morning both John and Randall set out from the camp leaving Larcena and Mercedes alone, despite Kirkland's uneasiness about the Indian situation.

John had gone to obtain some tools, and Randall was tracking a deer.

Suddenly, as Larcena was starting out to fetch water to do laundry, she heard Mercedes scream that Apache were coming. Retrieving a six-shooter from under the bedcovers, Larcena recalled, "I turned to fire at them . . . but before I could pull the trigger they had rushed upon me."

She screamed for help but was silenced quickly when the Indians "struck

they were doing and put a stop to it.

In halting Spanish, Larcena communicated with the older Apache. He told her that this country had belonged to the Indians, and that the white men had killed many of them.

Despite Larcena's weakened condition — she had recently suffered from a bout of "fever and ague" — the Indians forced her and Mercedes to walk fast. Hour after hour, they moved along, covering about 16 miles by Larcena's later estimate. But at last her strength failed her.

"I now lagged behind so much that my savage captors grew impatient and resolved to kill me. They stripped me of my clothing including my shoes, and left me but a single garment. They then thrust their lances at me, inflicting 16 wounds in my body, threw me over a ledge of rocks or precipice some 16 or 18 feet high and hurled large stones after me . . . and then left me, supposing I must die . . . I had alighted on a bank of snow, almost in a state of nudity and in a senseless condition."

According to one account, Larcena soon heard her husband's voice saying "Here it is, boys," meaning Larcena's tracks. She tried to call for help, but John and his companions did not hear her feeble cries and passed by, following the prints of her shoes worn by an Apache to mislead pursuers.

By her own reckoning, Larcena lay unconscious in that spot for "near three days." At last, so weak from loss of blood from wounds in her back, arms, and head that she could scarcely stand, she began her long journey back to the little cabin in Madera Canyon.

Eating only wild onions and seeds and drinking snow water, she struggled along for 10 days, avoiding any trail for fear of discovery by the Indians. Her sufferings can scarcely be grasped from her brief description:

"My feet gave out the first day, and I was compelled to crawl most of the distance. Did not dare to go to the foot of the mountain for I could find no water, and was therefore compelled to keep on

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Left for Dead

The true story of a pioneer woman's ordeal

Text by Chips Muehl
Illustrations by Bill Ahrendt

me with their lances, and told us to keep quiet or they would kill us." To add to her horror, one Apache who spoke a little Spanish, assured her that they had just killed her husband as he was drinking at a spring.

After the Indians looted the camp, they set out for their mountain retreat, taking Larcena and the little girl with them.

During this early part of the trek, the terrified Larcena and Mercedes tore off bits of their dresses and pulled twigs off bushes, dropping them as signs for a rescue party, but their captors detected what

Left for Dead

the steep and rocky mountain.

"Sometimes after crawling up a steep ledge, laboring hard for half a day, I would lose my footing and slide down lower than the place from which I started . . .

I was at a point said to be 6,000 feet above the sea and only wonder that I did not freeze. I scratched holes in the sand at night in which to sleep and before I could travel was obliged every day to wait for the sun to warm me up."

Years later Larcena told her son-in-law that "her feet became filled with small stones; her bare shoulders were blistered with the hot sun; her head was a mass of clotted blood."

Nights may have been her worst times. Unable to rest on her wounded back, she would crouch on all fours and dream of food.

Then each day, taking her direction from the sun, she would move toward the south until she came at last to a ridge overlooking Madera Canyon. From that vantage point, she could see men with an ox team and hear their voices. She screamed and waved her petticoat, tied to a stick, but the men didn't hear her and passed from sight.

Her slow journey continued. Two days later, she reached the vacant teamster camp and finding a campfire still burning low, retrieved a stick burning at one end and carried it to her husband's old camp close by. There she unearthed some coffee and flour and before long had "made me a little cake," washing it down with a hot drink. After bathing her wounds, she felt somewhat restored and resolved to sleep there that night.

The next morning on the road to the sawyer's camp, she was seen at last. But with her "clotted hair, and gaping wounds, nearly naked, emaciated and sunburned, she was at first mistaken for an unfortunate outcast squaw, and the men ran for their guns."

A more brutally realistic description of her was recorded by a traveling Englishman who saw her later in Tucson. He spoke of her "sunken temples, the lips drawn so tightly over the jaw that each tooth could be easily counted through them, the arms scarcely larger than a man's thumb, and the continuous cry for food."

John Page heard of his wife's return just as he was about to set out on his third rescue effort. Young Mercedes had also survived her captivity and was returned to safety in exchange for some Apache prisoners.

But the drama of Larcena's life was far from over. Only a year later when she was three months pregnant, her husband was killed by some Apache as he was traveling to Camp Grant. (All Larcena had to remember him by was "his handkerchief, his purse, and a lock of his hair.")

In September of that year, their daughter Mary Ann was born. Soon afterward, Larcena went back to live with her family in the stone house on the Santa Cruz River but was shortly forced to flee from the Apache with her baby, taking refuge in the fortified Mowry Mine.

There she faced yet another crisis when a smallpox epidemic broke out, and both she and her child were stricken.

Miraculously surviving a bread-and-water "cure" for this illness, Larcena and little Mary Ann returned to share the Pennington family's fortunes on its frequent moves during the years from 1862 to 1869. Like other families, they went wherever required to earn a living and avoid Apache attack. From Calabasas on the Santa Cruz, they moved to Tucson, then to Tubac, to the Sopori Ranch near Tubac, and finally to Fort Crittendon.

As freighters the Pennington men were obliged to spend long periods on the road with their great wagons and teams of 12 to 14 oxen. During these times, the women and children lived alone and coped with the ever-present Indian threat.

In 1864 a visitor to Tubac reported the village abandoned except for the Pennington women, their two young brothers, and Larcena's daughter. Every morning the two little boys "with guns as long as themselves, carefully reconnoitered each side of the path to the spring from which the women then carried the water supply for the day."

Later, at the Sopori Ranch, the women cultivated a small field near their "fortress home." Larcena remembered that near sunset, when the men were due to return home from a trip, she and the others would wait anxiously "until they heard the sound of the whips cracking" and the men calling to their oxen.

In 1868, brother Jim was killed by Apache he was pursuing to recover oxen stolen from his camp near Tucson.

Only a year later, Larcena's father, Elias, and her favorite brother, Green, also were killed by the Apache, Elias while plowing a field and Green in an attempt to save his father, not knowing that he had already been slain.

But the Apache were not the only enemy. That same year, the sadly diminished Penningtons lost still another member. Ellen died of pneumonia as the family was attempting to leave Arizona for

California. Sister Ann had died in 1867 of malaria.

Five members of the family dead in three years. Enough was enough, and brother Jack, who had been living in Texas, returned to collect the others and take them back with him. All, that is except Larcena.

She elected to stay in Arizona when she married Judge William F. Scott in 1870. Having had more than her share of drama and tragedy in her early years, she was to bear two more children and live the remainder of her life quietly in Tucson, dying there in 1913 at the age of 76.

What a pivotal and surprising role Larcena had played in the Pennington history. Pivotal in that it was her illness that caused the family to stop at Fort Buchanan, abandoning their plan to live in California.

Surprising because this apparently frail young woman with her recurrent fevers was to bear up through a forced march, a brutal attack, 16 days of indescribable hardship in the wilderness and still live to bear a child, survive smallpox, remarry and go on to a serene old age.

Strong though she was, Larcena "dreaded any mention of her ordeal." In a footnote in *Arizona in the Fifties*, James Tevis noted that he promised Judge Scott not to publish his manuscript, which included an account of Larcena's abduction, during his lifetime.

Mining engineer and explorer Raphael Pumpelly provided a final surprising glimpse of the indomitable Larcena: Stopping at the Pennington home on the Santa Cruz a few months after Larcena's ordeal at the hands of the Apache, Pumpelly heard and recorded Larcena's story, adding one detail not included in the other accounts: "I was told that the first thing she asked for [on her return to civilization] was tobacco, which she was in the habit of chewing." ❧

'They thrust their lances at me, inflicting 11 wounds, threw me over a ledge, hurled large stones after me, and then left me, supposing I must die.'

As a longtime mountain biker, Chips Muehl was fascinated by Larcena Pennington's astonishing feat.

Pine-based Bill Abrendt's specialty is painting figures and events of the history of the Southwest.