

# The Betsy Ross of the Bears

by Rick Foster

*SONOMA COUNTY, APRIL 1850*

*Lights rise on a room in a cabin, almost cleared out. A window giving onto a landscape of stumps. A chair. A small kitchen table.*

*Afternoon.*

*Nancy is sadly packing up a few final goods. She is twenty-six years old. She is dressed simply, getting ready to travel.*

NANCY

*(She is singing to herself from "Judgement Day." This song can be found in The American Vocalist cd, track 3. Nancy sings the first two verses without the refrain and then begins the refrain.)*

And must I be to judgement bro't,  
And answer in that day  
For every vain and idle tho't  
And every word I say?

The judgement day is rolling round.  
Prepare to meet thy God.  
The judgement day is . . .

*(The song trails off. She shakes her head.)*

Oh Ma. Ma, Ma, Ma.

You liked that "Judgement Day" didn't you, Ma? Course, that's cause you figured you'd be the judge.

I ain't sung that song for years.

But you know what, Ma? For the first time since I can't remember when, I wish I knew how to write so's I could write you about my life. Many's the time I've wanted to write you a letter just so's I could tell you how wrong you was!

Where was you wrong?! Oh, Ma, let me count the ways.

For starters, you was wrong about Ben Kelsey. Ben and me, we just have the finest marriage you could imagine.

And Ma, you was wrong about us comin' to California. We have us the best life out here. You couldn't even dream about how good our life is out here.

And Ma, you wanta hear what else you was wrong about? You was wrong about my apple pies. My apple pies are famous from Napa all the way to Petaluma, and especially right here in Sonoma where General Mariano Vallejo gives me ten bushels of his finest apples in exchange for just one of my pies. That's how wrong you was!

And that's what I wanted to write you, Ma. Oh, it gave me true delight to picture you hearin' the news. I'd imagine you gettin' so hot that steam came screamin' out a your ears and your hair caught fire under your bonnet and we had to douse you with ten buckets of water!

*(Enjoys the image.)*

But then the picture would change and I'd see you gettin' a little inward smile, thinkin' how your only daughter made such a good match. And then I'd feel maybe a little sheepish about gloatin' so fiercely over your discomfort, and then I'd wish I could write you truthfully how much I miss you and how sorry I am that we parted so hatefully.

But then I'd start to get riled up all over again about how mean you was about Ben and me gettin' married in the first place.

Anyhow, if I could write, this wouldn't be one a your gloatin' letters. This'd be one a your hurtin' letters. Who ever woulda thought I'd wanta trust you with my hurt, Ma? Wonders never cease. If you're gonna understand the hurt, I have to start back about the time you called me the world's greatest fool for goin' on a wagon train with Ben Kelsey and a ten-month-old daughter—practically cursin' me you were—and then you climbed on your mule and rode away without even kissin' your only grandchild goodbye.

If you remember, I was packin' up my seeds while we was havin' that last visit. Took seeds of ever'thing in the garden. Wrapped em in a oilskin wrappin', rolled em up and put em in a sealed tin which I vowed to protect come hell or high water.

You might remember, Ma, about the only good times we ever had together was workin' in your garden and if you never properly showed me how to cook at least you did pass me on your green thumb. I was determined to make a garden in California with seeds that had their origin in yours.

Well . . . that was the day before we set out for the West. That night, Ben woke me up in the dark and said, “Nancy, I just had me the best dream. We was livin’ in a big mansion with twenty black slaves and twelve white servants to take care of us. You didn’t even have to shuck the corn yourself.”

“Sounds real nice,” I said.

“So what did you dream?”

“Oh, you know me, Ben. I never remember my dreams.”

Actually I dreamt about you tellin’ me what a fool I was, but I warn’t gonna tell Ben that.

So in the mornin’, we took off with three more of the Kelsey brothers, then hooked up with a bunch a other people—all a who you woulda branded as fools—till we was about eighty in all.

We had to make the road as we went along. Diggin’ down steep banks, fillin’ gulches, what not. Then we’d get to a flat stretch. The train might spread out a little. But we kept pretty tight counta the threat a Injuns.

We slept in that narrow wagon, Ben and me, with Martha Ann between us. When I couldn’t sleep I’d ask Ben to tell me that dream again—the one about the mansion. Course he’d usually be out like a log so I’d just have tell it to myself.

One day on the Platte River the men went huntin’ and come back with a buffalo. What a magnificent beast! I got the fire stoked to cook a big roast when a growly sound come from the north. There was a cloud, shaped like a funnel, wavin’ like a little girl dancin on the horizon. Then the cloud got bigger and the growl swelled into a roar. That dancin’ girl turned into giant whose hair was full of whole trees, each one big enough to crush a church, and they was whirlin’ around about a hundred yards off the ground. Martha Ann started bawlin’.  
*(Lifts and comforts the baby.)*

“It’s all right, darlin’. If it picks us up it’ll take us right up to God’s Heaven. We’ll get there before Grandma does so we can warn em about her before she dies!”

But it turned the other way, Ma, and we was spared. Which means they still ain’t been warned about you up there.

We was about ten weeks out when we got to Soda Springs in the Rocky Mountains. One day as I was nursin’ Martha Ann it occurred to me to wonder what day it was. Someone tole me it was August 1. That was my birthday, Ma, as you might

recall, though you was usually too preoccupied to think of it when I was a girl. There I was with my husband an' my babe at Soda Springs in the middle of the wilderness an' I was eighteen years old.

At Soda Springs we rested our stock and the party split up. Most of 'em headed north to Oregon. Thirty-two of us went south for California. I was the only woman. I want you to remember that part, Ma. I was the only woman on the first wagon train to California!

That's when the goin' got rough. Ain't no wagons ever been where we was takin' our wagons.

Well, we didn't take em as far as we wanted. I bet you was waitin' to hear this part. Okay, then, you was right. Enjoy it.

Somewhere on the Humboldt River we decided we could get caught in the snows of winter if we kept them wagons. So we left em in the desert and proceeded on horseback. I left my pots. I left my scissors, which was stupid. Left most a my clothes, and I left them pretty blue china plates that Grandma give me fore she died.

I kept my seeds though. I sewed em in a pocket a my dress. I couldn't picture California in my mind, but I could picture what my garden would look like when I finally got to make a home. If I was gonna get to California, them seeds was gonna get there too.

We had only the mistiest notion where we was. Only thing we knew was we had to keep goin' west. We struggled to the top of some mountains and couldn't see no way down. Next mornin' the men decided to scatter and look for a path.

*(Enters the past.)* "Okay, Andy, see you tonight. It's all right Ben, you just be careful and I'll see you by dark. I'll –just sit up here on the horse with Martha Ann. And I have the pistol here if any Injuns show up. *(She watches the men go; continues talking to herself.)* . . . Oooh, that's the loneliest wind I ever heard in my life. No wonder it sighs and moans like that, it don't have no more idea where it is than we do, Martha Ann.

*(Begins to sing "Deal gently with thy servants Lord"; American Vocalist track 22.)*

"Gently Lord, O gently lead us,  
Thro' this lonely vale of tears,  
And, O Lord, in mercy give us  
Thy rich grace in all our fears.

"In the hour of pain and anguish

In the hour when death draws near . . .”

“Oh, I hope that ain’t death drawing near now. Hope that ain’t what we hear in the footsteps of the wind. Come, on Martha Ann, let’s you and me say a little prayer that your daddy gets back before dark.”

*(Comes out of the past.)*

Which he did. Next day we started down. We sent Ben’s brother Andy Kelsey ahead to bring back help if he could. Remember Andy, Ma? You hated him even more than you hated Ben. Well, Andy never came back so we decided he was dead. Go ahead, have your little celebration over that.

We couldn’t ride our horses no more. They was barely strong enough to carry our few belongin’s. I’d gone through both my pairs a shoes so I was barefoot, carryin’ Martha Ann. Them weeks are all jumbled in my memory like a troublin’ dream. Like a melody you can’t keep from runnin’ round and round in your mind:

*(Sings, from American Vocalist Track 5:)*

“Come, O thou Traveler unknown,  
Whom still I hold, but cannot see;  
My company before is gone  
And I am left alone with thee.”

I think it was just the music that kept me goin’, Ma.

Somehow we got over them mountains and down a river. We could see more mountains to the west. For all we knew, we coulda been five hundred miles from the sea. But then, who should we see comin’ out of the dust but Andy Kelsey! He warn’t dead. He was alive and kickin’ and ridin’ a fresh horse. He said, “It is well nigh impossible to kill a Kelsey man.”

Aw, Ma, does that ruin your celebration? Well, just be patient, then. Turned out we was already in California! Andy had found civilization and come back lookin’ for us!

A few days later, I walked into Sutter’s Fort. I was barefoot and I was tattered, but I already knew that I was the first American Woman to walk across the Sierra Nevada mountains in the history of the world. That’s something not even you can ever take away from me, Ma.

We spent that winter at Sutter’s Fort and made plans to work with Captain Sutter.

Turned out I’d been pregnant durin’ our journey. I gave birth in February. Poor little Samuel Kelsey.

O, my baby. He lived but eight days, Ma. He was your first grandson. Go ahead and blame me, go ahead! If I hadn't a come on the wagon train he woulda lived. I can't answer that charge, Ma, I can't. God bless his perfect soul.

We put him in the ground, first thing we planted in California.

*(More from "Deal Gently With Thy Servants Lord.")*

"When this mortal life is ended,  
Bid us in thine arms to rest,  
Till by angel bands attended  
We awake among the blest."

I never even had proper time to grieve his death, Ma. There was so much we had to learn. We had to learn about the Mexicans. There was two kinds a Mexicans in California. Some of em welcomed Americans, like General Mariano Vallejo who is one a the finest people you could imagine. But others was afeared we was gonna be a threat to their property and they could get pretty mean. You had to learn how to tell one from the other before you made a deadly mistake.

In the spring of '42 we left the kitchen door of Sutter's Fort and took off for Clear Lake. See, Sutter had need of a lot of shoes for the Injuns he was tryin' to civilize. So we camped by Clear Lake all summer, killin' the elk, makin' Spanish boots outa the hides, and renderin' the fat into tallow for candles.

One day some Mexican troops chased a runaway Negro into our camp. He fell down and they shot him four times. Then each of the men ran his sword through the body. Bring good luck, they said.

Turned out their leader was Salvador Vallejo.

But he was exactly the opposite kind of Mexican from his brother. He put us under arrest and his men took all our guns.

Lucky for us, it was gettin' dark so they pitched their camp and soon fell asleep, except for one guard.

After a while, Ben looked over and said, "I think that guard a theirs is sawin' logs. Go take a look, Nancy. Sure enough, he was leaned up against an oak tree snorin' away.

So Ben and Andy and me crept into their tents, quietly took back our weapons, and set out under the moon for Sutter's Fort.

The boots and tallow we made was worth a lot. Sutter offered us a choice—a piece of land and fifty head of cattle or a

hundred head of cattle but no land. I said, "Let's take the land, Ben. Let's settle down." But he said we could make a better profit if we drove them hundred cattle up to Oregon.

He was right. When we got them cattle to Fort Vancouver, Oregon we got twice as much money as we ever expected. I give birth to little Sarah up there. She was the happiest baby I ever saw. I said to Ben, "This Oregon is pretty nice. I wouldn't mind buyin' some land and settlin' down right here."

"If we do that," he said, "we'll just be farmers."

"What's wrong with farmers?" I said.

"Farmers don't live in no mansions," he said. "California is where the real opportunity is." I always had to remember, Ma. That was his dream.

So we come back to California and bought this land near Sonoma. Built us a cabin. Ben was tryin' his hand at this and that, but we stayed put. Oh, Ma, them was the happiest years of my life. I got to plant my seeds. Start my herb garden. Make a lovely home for my children.

We renewed our friendship with General Vallejo. Him and Ben started a saw mill together.

He had us over to his big house in Sonoma. That house is just as grand as Senator Benton's house in St. Louis. Difference was, Ma, we coulda lived in Missouri a thousand years and never been invited to no Senator's house. We dressed up fine and went to dine with the first families of California. there was fiddle music and guitar music and señoritas doin' the fanciest dancin' I ever saw and all sorts a spicy food.

And as I floated home that night on the memory of the music, I said to Ben, "You're always talkin' 'bout how California's gotta get free of Mexico and join the United States. But then what'll happen to General Vallejo?"

"Listen to this," he said. "The General tole me that he wants to be American himself."

Well, I had to put that in my pipe and smoke it.

But as it turned out, they was both too optimistic.

The problem started with that damned Colonel Fremont, if you'll pardon my French.

He showed up in California at the end of 1845 with a company of sixty soldiers. All the Americans said this meant war with

Mexico. They started cleanin' their guns and hoardin' gunpowder so's they could be ready to have some fun when the action started.

Fremont was movin' all over the map, drivin' the Mexican authorities crazy. He even went to Oregon once but turned around and come back to a camp in the Mountains above Sacramento. It all seemed pretty suspicious to me.

Us Americans wondered what Fremont was up to so a bunch of us rode over there to see him.

I walked into that camp circle and there he was, sittin' on a rock. Oh, Ma, that Fremont is a handsome devil. He has a high brow and what you might call smoulderin' eyes. He parts his hair down the middle, like a woman. He looks like he's keepin' secrets all the time so even when he's tellin' you somethin' straight you wonder what he's got up his sleeve.

He give me a real sharp look. Right then I remembered he's married to that highfalutin' daughter of our own Senator Benton. I didn't trust him any farther than I could throw him an' I thought Ben would feel the same, but lo and behold, Ben was gawkin' at him like he was Andrew Jackson or somethin'.

Fremont took his eyes off a me and never give me a second glance the whole time I was there. He stood up on his rock and tole the men he'd just received a secret message from President Polk. The war with Mexico is comin' real soon, he said. What the President would like is for the California Mexicans to declare themselves independent of Mexico City. He would like them Mexicans to ask for annexation to the United States. Fremont looked over the crowd and put it to the boys: "What do you think about that idea?"

I looked around. Nobody was sure what to say. Finally brother Andy shouted out, "I wouldn't trust them greasers no way." Then most of the others started chimin' in: "That's the damn truth!"

But Ben, he didn't say nuthin. That's cause I was right beside him and we'd just talked about our friend, General Vallejo. So Fremont looked him square in the face: "What about you, Kelsey? Do you trust the-Greasers?" Oh, he was takin' Ben's measure I can tell you that.

Ben said: "Well, sir. I think we ought to do like Texas did and declare a Republic of American immigrants."

Oh, Ma, when Ben said that, there came a bright spark into Fremont's smoulderin' eyes. I could see, he wanted nothing' more in this wide world than to be the man who conquered

California.

So Fremont had the Americans organize a militia which called 'emselfes "the Bears." And he sent them Bears to capture Sonoma. Ben was so proud to be servin' under Fremont!

And what about your daughter, Ma? You wouldn't expect me to say no to the idea of a new American republic, would you? I was right on the scene when they occupied the city. And listen to this, Ma, your little Nancy became the Betsy Ross of that war of independence!

Yes I was!

After they took over Sonoma, the boys come to me and said, "We got us a Republic, Nancy, but we ain't got no flag."

"Heck," I said, "That shouldn't be no problem." I rooted 'round my chests and found a bare piece of white fabric. *(Unfurls a piece of muslin about three and a half feet by five feet.)* "Think this might do the trick?"

"But Nancy, we can't just run up a bare flag."

"Not a bare flag," I said, "but a **bear** flag."

They looked at each other. They didn't get it.

"Bear Flag? . . . as in **Grizzly** Bear?!"

"Oh!" they said and just started slappin' their knees, it was so funny!

In two shakes of a lamb's tail one of em started drawin' a bear on my cloth. Actually it looked more like a pig with a pointy snout than any Grizzly Bear. When he was done there was still somethin' missin'. So I pulled out a pair of my red flannel long-johns, cut out a stripe, sewed it on the bottom, and there was our noble flag!

You get that, Ma? I was part of history!

There was Mexican guerrillas tryin' to mount a resistance. One day Ben went out lookin' for 'em with Fremont and his men.

He come back late that night and I could see somethin' was wrong. He wouldn't tell me nuthin'. He just ate his supper, went in an' looked at the girls sleepin', and started drinkin' a bottle of whiskey.

"Ben," I said, "What is it?" He just shook his head. "Ben, I'm your Nancy. . . You can tell me."

“You remember old Don Berreyessa?”

“Course I do. He was our neighbor last summer and a better man never lived. Did–did somethin’ happen to old Don?”

So he tole me he and Fremont and the others was down by San Francisco Bay when they saw a little boat comin over from San Pablo. There warn’t no guerrillas in it. Just good old Don and the de Haro twins. But before they even come ashore, Fremont said to Ben, “I don’t have time for no prisoners. I want you to shoot those men.”

Ben said, “I ain’t shootin’ my old friend.”

Fremont give him the cold stare. “Are you disobeyin’ my order?”

“I’d die myself before I’d shoot a friend.”

So Fremont turned to Kit Carson, who shot em down in cold blood.

After he tole me that, he got so drunk I had to put him to bed for the only time in our whole marriage. The name of Fremont was never mentioned in our house after that.

Still, when the war was over, things really started to go our way.

It’s a funny thing, Ma, you know how Grandma always used to tell us, “The night is always darkest just before the dawn”? I recall you’d usually make a little “there-she-goes-again” face behind her back. Used to get me riled at you, cause I always loved Grandma. But now I know what you meant. The opposite is true. The day is always **brihonest** just before some mean-hearted thunderstorm knocks you on your backside with a bolt a lightnin’.

That’s how it went. The lumber mill we had with General Vallejo was goin’ great guns. We applied for a big grant of land– 92,000 acres–up by Clear Lake. Brother Andy and a man named Charlie Stone went up there with a herd of cattle. Charlie got himself what they call an Injun wife, though it was without benefit of no preacher.

We went up to visit. They was makin’ the Injuns build ’em a huge adobe house. Ben’s eyes lit up. He said, “Nancy, that’s how big I want our mansion to be.” I knew he was gonna try to talk me into movin’ up there.

But it made my flesh creep, Ma. Somethin’ about them Injuns makin’ all them adobe bricks, and gettin’ so little pay.

There was somethin' cursed about that labor.

I tole em it was a bad idea. But they they just laughed me off. Who could turn down labor that only cost ten cents a day? It was gonna work out fine, they said, cause they had a Injun foreman named Shuk who had helped us fight against the Mexicans. Shuk was real smart and real civilized and he loved Americans. Shuk was gonna keep them Injuns in line.

As we were ridin' home Ben made his appeal. "Nancy, sure would be nice to live up there by Clear Lake in a mansion with fifty Injun servants."

"You're the man, Ben. But I don't trust them Injuns. Let's wait and see how it works out with Charlie an' Andy."

He got a little sulky, but didn't say no more about it.

Then gold got discovered. Ben sold out the sawmill to Vallejo, gathered a gang a Injuns and took em up to the gold country. He worked them Injuns in the dry diggin's and was able dig up one hundred dollars per Injun per day! And since he didn't have to pay the Injuns but ten cents a day, you can figure the profit.

He come ridin' home and I run out of the house to hug him.

He said, "There's gold in that saddlebag there. If you can lift it off the horse you can have it all for yourself."

"I wouldn't want it for myself," I said. "Though I would like enough so that we wouldn't never have to move again."

"Well, if you can lift it, we'll never have to move again."

"All right," I said. And I grabbed onto that saddlebag and . . . I could not budge it!

So Ben took that money and started a tradin' post up in the Sacramento valley.

And that's when the thunderstorm suddenly gathered on our bright day.

The Injuns round Clear Lake was gettin' gettin' real hungry, 'counta Andy and Charlie wouldn't let em hunt on the ranch. So they persuaded Shuk to kill em one a our beeves. But it was a wet night. They bungled the job and lost Andy's favorite horse. Well, that Shuk musta known he was in for a hundred lashes of the bull whip, and probably gettin' hanged as well. So, just like I thought, them Injuns decided to murder Andy and Charlie. They ambushed em at dawn.

Yep, Ma, it turned out it warn't so well nigh impossible to kill a Kelsey man after all.

So there you have it, Ma, you can have your celebration about Andy's demise and I ain't a gonna take it back this time. He was deader 'n a door nail.

While this was happenin' at Clear Lake, Ben took sick at the tradin' post. His asthma was actin' up so's he could hardly breathe. He had to abandon the post and come back to Sonoma. Everything got stole up there.

And the Injuns up at Clear Lake, started stealin' our cattle right an' left. We had to sell off the whole herd and took a terrible loss. Then the army went up and massacred the Injuns. Didn't help us though—we still lost the land grant.

'Bout all we have left is the land 'round this cabin. Well—no matter. I just want Ben to get well again.

Yesterday I left him lyin' in bed and rode into Sonoma to get some medicine. I left him in the care of Martha Ann who's eight now. Carryin' my newest babe on my lap I rode toward town.

Halfway there a Injun stepped onto the road. I recognized it was Shuk, from up at the ranch. He was holdin' a lasso and I could see he wanted to throw it over me and drag me off my horse. I guess he wanted some revenge for the army killin' his people. He wanted me to spur the horse so's he could drag me off. But I refused. I tole him I had a pistol and would shoot him if he raised that rope. I don't know if he understood but he said somethin' in his own language and backed off. I galloped to the fort an' tole em what happened. They brought him in and sentenced him to one hundred lashes.

At home I tole Ben what happened. Ma, would you believe it, that news did more than any medicine. He got out a bed, put on his pistol, rode into Sonoma, and shot that Shuk dead in his jail cell.

Well, Ma, that brings you almost up to date. Ben woke up this mornin' feelin' a lot better. But that incident yesterday was just the final straw. He wants to pull up stakes and try our luck up by Humboldt Bay.

He wants me to leave here, Ma. He wants me to leave this house I've been makin' just the way I want it. He wants Martha Ann to leave her friends.

I just spent three weeks preparin' the soil, Ma. I had em bring over wagons full a manure which I worked into the ground.

Worked it and worked it and worked it. Last Tuesday I put a thousand seeds in the ground.

“Ben, do we really have to go? Do we really, really have to?”

He said, “Nancy, I just don’t feel good here any more.”

“But Ben, I just planted all my seeds!”

“You can get more seeds up in Humboldt. Seeds are cheap.”

“But these are from the seeds I brought from home.”

“Home?” he said. “Home? Don’t be childish, Nancy. Missouri warn’t no proper home. You never liked your Mama in the first place.” And he walked out to the barn.

Ma, I just broke down. I just broke down and cried. I just . . . broke down.

*(She takes time to control her urge to cry again.)*

It breaks my heart to leave them seeds in the ground here. And it warn’t true what he said. I do love you, Ma.

I can’t stand you—but I love you.

Still, Ben’s the man. He is my husband. What he says is what we do.

And he’s right. Seeds are cheap. No use gettin’ all broke up. Wherever we land, I’ll make me as good a garden as I can.

*(Goes to a door and calls out.)* Martha Ann. You go find Sarah and bring in her and the baby. We’ll be goin’ soon.

*(Turns back to the room. Sighs.)*

Well, Ma, that’s all I have to say for now. I do hope you are still alive an’ kickin’. And I do want you to know two things. I may be leavin’ your seeds behind here, but I was the first American woman to cross the Sierra Nevada, and I was the Betsy Ross of the Bear Flag.

And one thing more: I will survive. It is well nigh impossible to kill a Kelsey woman.

*(She smiles, thinks, and begins singing as she finishes the packing)*

“Yes, every secret of my heart  
Shall shortly be made known,  
And I receive my just desert

For all that I have done

“The judgement day is rolling round.  
Prepare to meet thy God.  
The judgement day is . . .”

*(The song trails off.)*

*Blackout.*