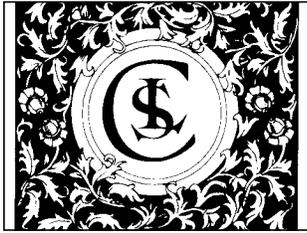


CALIFORNIA  
STATE  
LIBRARY  
FOUNDATION

Number 109  
2014

# Bulletin





# Bulletin

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The *Bulletin* is included as a membership benefit to Foundation members and those individuals contributing \$40.00 or more annually to Foundation Programs. Membership rates are:

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**Back Cover:** The National Automotive School of Los Angeles published this 1925 catalog in 1925 catalog to attract Spanish speaking students. See p. 28.

**Illustrations / Photos:** All images are from the collections of the California State Library in Sacramento. Illustrations for pages 2-19 and 28-30 are from the California History Section. Illustrations on pages 20-23 are from the Government Publications Section. The photograph on page 24 was taken by Vincent Beiderbecke.

**Design:** Angela Tannehill, Tannehill Design

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# Under the Sign of the Sagebrush

} Idah Meacham Strobridge  
} and the Southland's Bohemia

By Nina Schneider

*If you go to the Desert,  
and live there, you learn to love it.  
If you go away, you will never  
forget it for one instant in after life;  
it will be with you in memory  
forever and forever. And always will  
you hear the still voice that  
lures one, calling – and calling.<sup>1</sup>*

—IDAH MEACHAM STROBRIDGE



Author and bookbinder  
Idah Meacham Strobridge.



#### EDITOR'S NOTE

*Nina Schneider is Head Cataloger at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, and currently serves as the president of the Southern California Chapter of the American Printing History Association. She is also an active member of the Rare Books and Manuscript Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries.*

Laura Idah Meacham Strobridge was a nineteenth century pioneer. She was a rancher, a miner, a bookbinder, an author, and a society lady. Her story is filled with courage, determination, character, and intelligence, and an understanding that life is more than survival. Familiarly known as Idah, she was born in Moraga Valley, California, in June of 1855, the only daughter of Phebe and George Meacham. As a young man seeking his fortune, George traveled by boat from New York to San Francisco via Panama in the great gold rush of 1849. While he was there, he built a small Baptist Church for Reverend O. C. Wheeler,<sup>2</sup> creatively, or as a matter of course, using the foresail of an abandoned ship for the roof-ridge. Although he had staked a claim, it must not have paid off since he returned to his native New Jersey and married Phebe Amelia Craiger. They remained together long enough to conceive Idah before George left again to return to San Francisco, leaving behind his wife expectant with their second child. When Phebe received a letter from her husband stating that his claim had been jumped, she immediately departed for California, never to return to the East Coast.

In the mid-1860s the western United States was still a vast and dangerous wilderness, slowly being tamed by the ever-increasing reach of the railroads. Magazines and brochures produced by agents promoting opportunities in the West advertised two methods of relocation. One was by booking a passage on the Pacific Mail Company's steamer which left New York Harbor and arrived in Panama eight days later. Travelers would then transfer to a train which would take them across the Isthmus in order to board



Ever resourceful Idah Strobridge took this photograph of herself holding one of the tools of her new trade, a backing hammer. She frequently autographed this portrait with the inscription "Yours —without apology—The Bookbinder."

another steamer arriving in San Francisco in thirteen days. Although this may have been the route that George Meacham took when he first set out to California, another, and more popular, choice was to travel by train. Passengers would ride on the Great Overland Railway to Omaha, Nebraska, where they would transfer to the Union Pacific, and later the Central Pacific Railroad to California.<sup>3</sup>

Rails were being laid at a rapid rate. Between 1864 and 1875 the nation's rail-network doubled in mileage.<sup>4</sup> The rail-

roads gained importance as they brought emigrants to the West Coast and returned to the East Coast with livestock. In 1868, the population in California was 450,000.<sup>5</sup> Twelve years later it had nearly doubled to 789,577 and by 1884 it had reached one million.<sup>6</sup> The Strobridge family did their part to add to this population.

When Idah was ten, the family moved from the Moraga Valley to Humboldt County in northwestern Nevada. George had given up mining and was home-steading ranch-lands instead. The Mexi-

The author and bookbinder filled out this biographical card at the request of the State Library in 1906. Sadly, she wrote that she had been a widow since November 1888.

Strobridge built her home and studio at 231 East Avenue 41 in the Arroyo Seco between Los Angeles and Pasadena. Her home was close to that of Charles Lummis, the noted writer and “Crusader in Corduroy.” Unfortunately, the Artemisia Bindery was later leveled to make way for an apartment building.

T. 1906

CALIFORNIA STATE LIBRARY

Strobridge

Name in full, *Idah Meacham Strobridge*

Born at *Marysville, Contra Costa Co., Cal.* on *June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1855*

Father, *George W. Meacham*; Mother (maiden name in full), *Chloe Amelia Craiger* (widow since <sup>Nov. 1888</sup>)

If married, to whom? *Samuel Haskin Strobridge*

Place, *San Francisco Cal.* Date, *Sept 3<sup>d</sup> 1884*

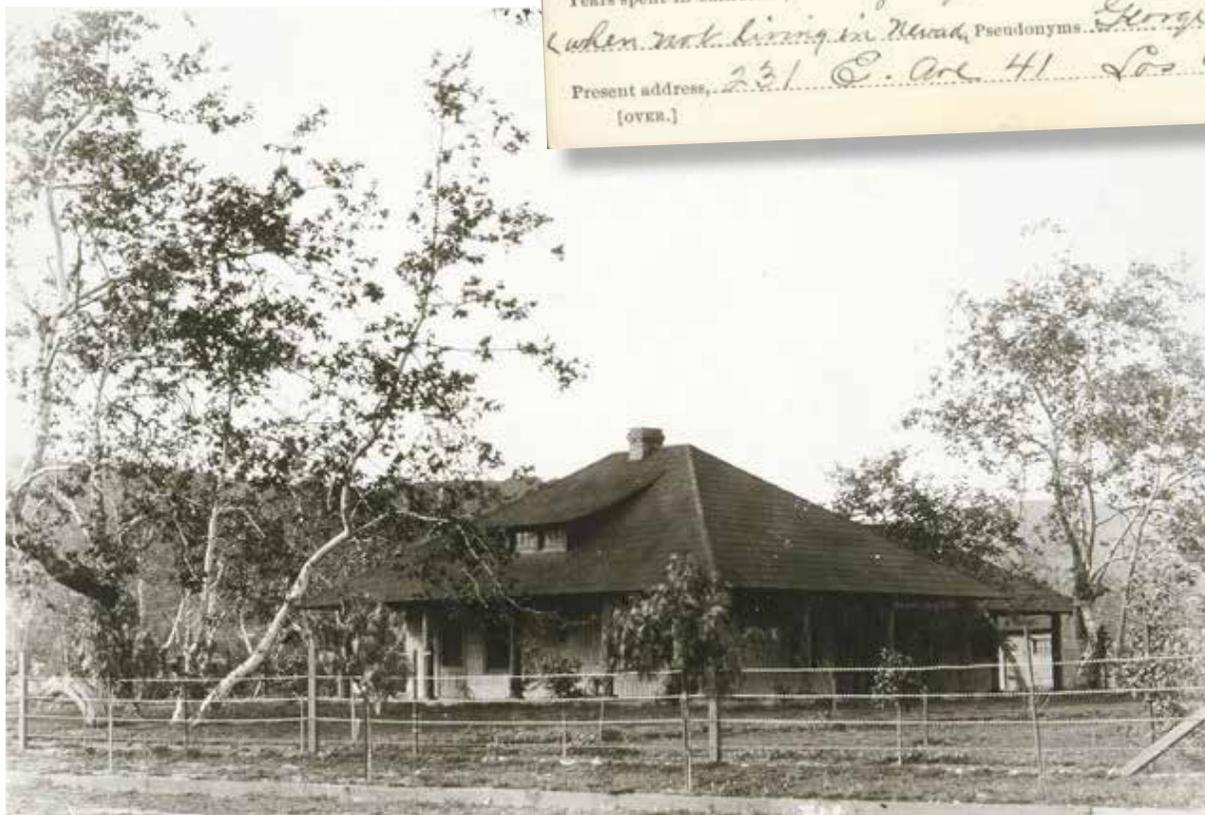
Where educated, *Mills - Alameda Co., Cal.*

Years spent in California, *most of life* Residences in State, *San Francisco*

(when not living in Nevada, Pseudonyms, *George W. Craiger*)

Present address, *231 E. Ave 41 Los Angeles*

[OVER.]

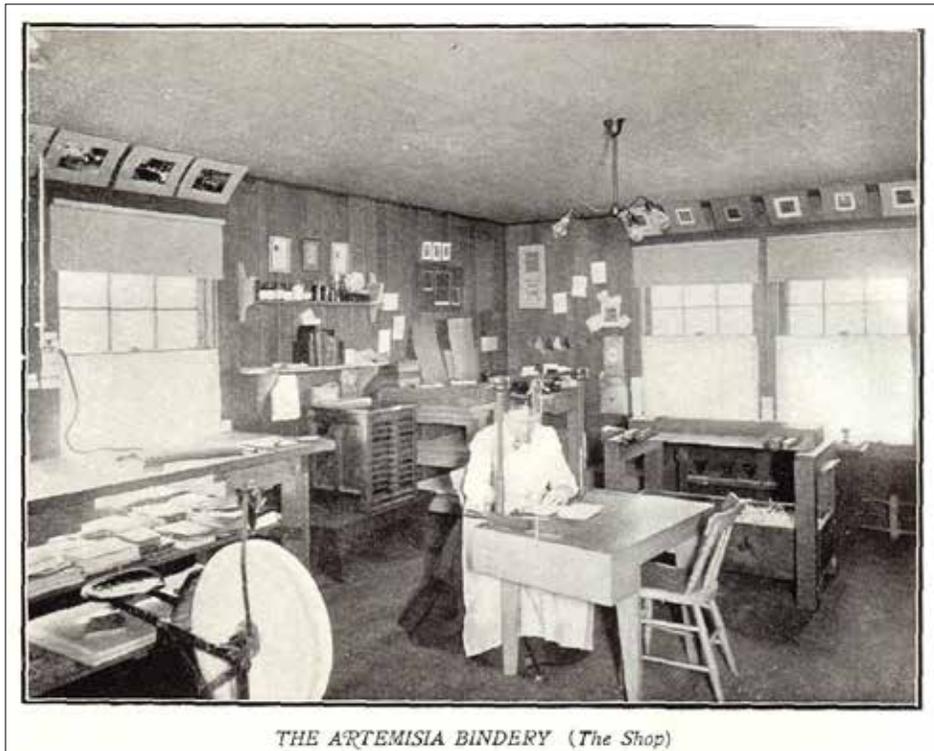


can government was offering land grants “intended for grazing purposes only, and of comparatively little value.”<sup>7</sup> The boundaries of these tracts were never formalized and George was the beneficiary of this informality.<sup>8</sup> Once the Central Pacific Railroad reached the Humboldt River route, George Meacham built a hotel and restaurant, known as Humboldt House, to cater to rail travelers. It was here that Idah grew up in the relative isolation of Nevada ranch-lands while witnessing a vast array of people passing through the area. She saw individuals from all over the world emigrating to the West, spreading from California and mov-

ing into Nevada, looking for quick fortunes from gold and silver mines, as well as families traveling through Nevada, not to seek gold but a better life in California. Idah also had contact with Native Americans, Mexican cowboys, and Chinese miners. She would eventually use these characters and these experiences in her writings.

George Meacham must have been successful in running his hotel and ranch because Idah was sent to Alameda County in California to attend college at Mills Seminary. Now known as Mills College in Oakland, the school was founded by Cyrus and Susan Mills in 1852 as a women’s seminary

at a time when less than eight percent of the population in California were women and there was no “educational arrangement” for the “young daughters of leading citizens.”<sup>9</sup> The founders “set their minds . . . on establishing a college for women, [as] an institution that should meet a local need, but possess a continental standard of excellence.” They aimed to “give girls a serious education, not to be a finishing school.” And they believed that “in no way can [this] more be accomplished than in rightly educating those who are to become wives, mothers, and teachers, and hence shape the destiny of individuals and nations.”<sup>10</sup>



The "Artemisia Bindery (the Shop)." This photograph shows Strobbridge at her sewing frame surrounded by her binding equipment. Published in editions of 1,000 copies, she bound each volume herself.

A glance at a later Mills College catalogue reveals that although tuition was "virtually free," room and board cost \$350 for the academic year and \$10 was charged for books and stationery per term. If a student was interested in piano or voice lessons, she would be charged an additional fee. Idah excelled in elocution<sup>11</sup> which would have cost her father an extra \$30 per class each term.<sup>12</sup> Idah graduated from Mills in 1883, thirteen years before these prices were current but still relatively expensive for a homesteader from Nevada.

While at Mills Seminary, Idah met Samuel Hooker Strobbridge, a construction manager for the Southern Pacific Railroad. They were married after she graduated. She was twenty-eight at the time, eight years his senior. As a wedding gift, George Meacham gave the couple ranchlands adjoining his own in Humboldt County, Nevada. A promising future of ranching and mining failed to materialize

and instead turned to tragedy. The tragedy, however, was the impetus for Idah's self-empowerment. Her first son Earl, born a year after she married Samuel, died the day after he was born. Her second son Gerald, born in 1886, and her third son Kenneth, born in 1887, as well as her husband all died from pneumonia during the bitter winter of 1888-89.<sup>13</sup>

Any person faced with such a loss wouldn't be blamed for seeking refuge in a quiet life, but five years after losing her husband and children, Idah's name appears in a number of scientific journals. The search for precious metals and minerals became more common in Nevada once the California lodes were exhausted. Idah assisted surveyors in locating mine claims even though some of these prospects were far-fetched. The following article by an unidentified writer appeared in the June 1895 issue of *Scientific American* and the July issue of *Mining and Scientific Press*:

"I have spent the month of June in the Humboldt Mountains, looking over good gold prospects. The main claim is called the "Lost Mine." It was opened thirty-one years ago, prior to the advent of the railroad. A shaft was sunk on the vein about 25 feet, it averaging about \$75 per ton gold. At that time it would not pay, owing to the excessive cost of mining material and labor. During the past four years persistent searches were made for the mine, but each time were abandoned, until this spring when a cultured woman of the new age appeared in the person of Mrs. Ida[sic] M. Strobbridge . . . She has also located five claims on the lode, laid out a new camp and named it after her father, "Meacham"; and reorganized the district anew as the "Humboldt"; she has four men to work and is superintending operations herself. She has also located the water and springs flowing over the claims, which are nine miles east of the Central Pacific Railroad, at the Humboldt House . . ."<sup>14</sup>

It was during this time that Idah was not only managing her own ranch, but her father's as well that she discovered bookbinding as a means to guarantee her livelihood. She was introduced to the craft by an unidentified amateur. When she wrote to practicing bookbinders, asking for advice and instruction, they chose not to share their knowledge with someone who would potentially compete for their clients. Finding an envelope with the address of a bookbinding supply store, she ordered basic tools and a nipping press and proceeded to teach herself. Either unable or unwilling to pay for the special furniture and frames required for sewing and covering, George Meacham came to Idah's rescue and custom built the items she needed to start her business. "The first thing you must have, if you want to learn bookbinding for a living, is a father,' sa[id] Mrs. Strobbridge."<sup>15</sup>