

Frances Fuller Victor (1826-1902)

Oregon's First Woman of Letters

By Jim Martin – © 2004

Upon reading her obituary in November 1902, one editor referred to Frances Fuller Victor as the “Clio of the Northwest.” Mrs. Victor’s funeral in Portland was well attended despite extremely stormy weather and a small procession of carriages accompanied her coffin to its interment at Riverview Cemetery. A brief graveside ceremony, the hurried turning of a few shovelfuls of earth, and those present scattered to the warmth of hearth and home.

But what of the woman whose burial site remained unmarked for 45 years? Although not a goddess in the mythical Greek sense, Frances Fuller showed her potential early. Her mother was “a passionate lover of the beautiful in nature and art,” and Frances, born May 23, 1826, in Rome, New York, the eldest of five daughters, took up poetry as a means of self-expression. Even then, her work was known for its realism. While still a young girl in Ohio, she gained wide recognition as a poet and novelist. In 1848-1849, she visited New York City and met many prominent literary people. Edgar Allan Poe ranked Frances among America’s “most imaginative” young poets.

Frances and several friends were ready to leave for Europe in the spring of 1850, but the death of her father compelled Frances to return home and help support the family. A stint followed as assistant editor of a monthly magazine in Detroit—then marriage to the son of a prominent Michigan pioneer in June 1853. The couple homesteaded near Omaha in 1855; and for several years they struggled with the land. Her husband abandoned Frances and in 1859 she returned east to resume her literary career, and, three years later, legally terminate the relationship.

In May 1862 in Philadelphia, Frances wed her second husband, Henry Clay Victor, a naval engineer. Mr. Victor was transferred to the Pacific fleet in March 1863; the couple sailed south from New York City. Their journey led to “mossy, venerable, quaint, but fever-haunted Panama”—then Acapulco and their destination, San Francisco. In this colorful metropolis, Frances was encouraged to write journalism and history, and she became “familiar with [the] city and tolerably conversant with the characteristics of the country.”

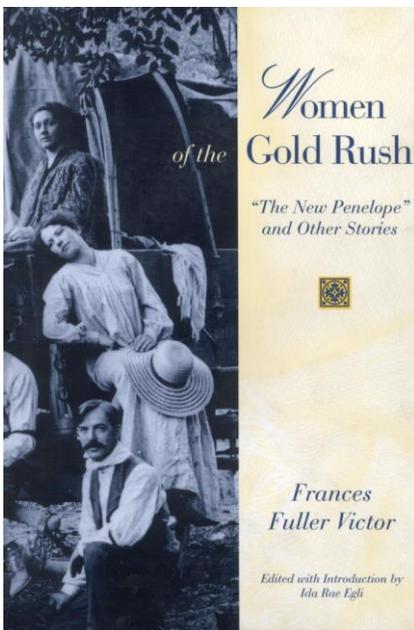
By the time she followed her husband to Oregon in December 1864, Mrs. Victor had become, in her own words, “perfectly a self-poised and too worldly-wise woman.” The romance and adventure of the place was enticing.



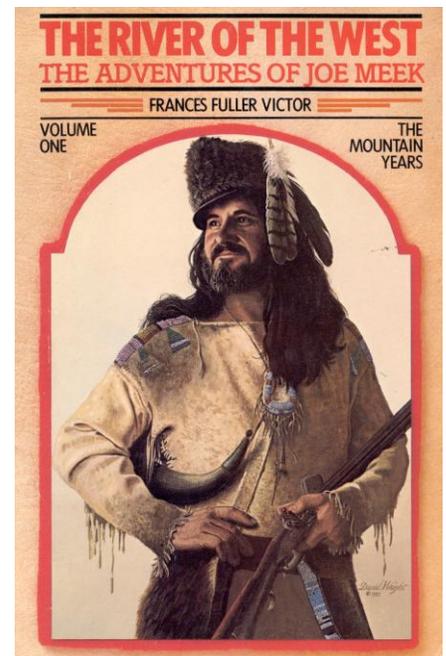
Frances Fuller Victor – 1878
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In May 1865 was the first of Mrs. Victor's many trips to see Oregon for herself. Her habitat was chiefly Oregon, Washington and northern California, but she also visited British Columbia, Idaho, Nevada, and, possibly, Montana. She "sought information far and wide, of all classes and denominations alike." During 38 years on the Pacific coast, she came to know the region's life and history.

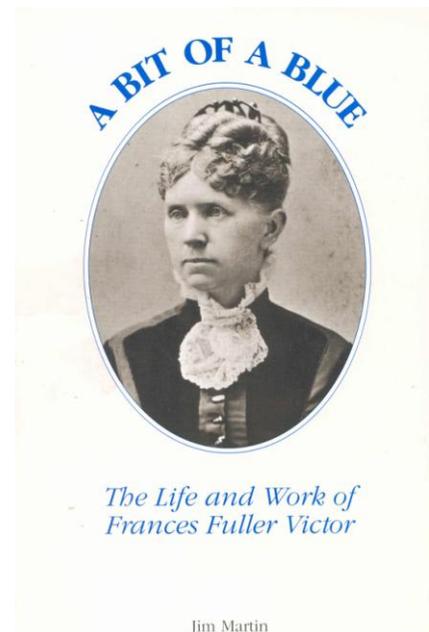
Meanwhile, her husband's business ventures all failed, leaving the couple deeply in debt. In 1868, Frances and Henry agreed to separate. For Mrs. Victor, writing became "as much a matter of bread-and-butter with me now, as of literary reputation." In 1870, her first book, *The River of the West*, a popular biography of the famous Oregon mountain man Joe Meek, was published. Two years later came *All Over Oregon and Washington*, a volume that amplified letters she wrote in 1870 while traveling in the Pacific Northwest.



Her third book, *The New Penelope*, a collection of 10 fictional short stories and 40 poems, appeared in 1877. She frequently contributed to news-papers and magazines, but found the pay low and living difficult. Still she hesitated when in July 1878 San Francisco publisher Hubert Howe Bancroft offered her "an engagement" as one of the writers—and the only woman—on a multi-volume history of the Pacific coast—from Panama to Alaska, including the western United States. Frances "felt a good deal cut up by having my field invaded by another, not so well prepared, but who had a plump exchequer and an



Mrs. Victor served as secretary of the Oregon State Woman Suffrage Association from 1874-1877 and was a member of its executive committee. "I felt some preparation to be necessary, and did not care to have the ballot thrust upon those who would repudiate it, instead of comprehending its best uses." Frances also believed women had "the ability, the courage and coolness for any great work" and that they should train for "a wider sphere of duties."



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army of assistants.”

Unable to compete with “such superior forces” she sailed in October 1878 to San Francisco as Bancroft’s Oregon history specialist. However, the writers quickly learned that they could keep their jobs only if they allowed Bancroft to claim their work as his own. Bancroft’s intention “troubled me considerably,” Mrs. Victor recalled. “I did not know him well enough to judge how much or how little justice we should receive at his hands, nor could I learn until the work had been all done.”

Frances completed the first volume of Oregon history by early 1880. Covering the period 1832-1847, it was her most thorough study. The second volume was nearly ready by August 1884. Subsequently, she wrote the *History of Nevada, Colorado and Wyoming* and the *History of Washington, Idaho and Montana*. She contributed parts of two others in the 39-volume series. Mrs. Victor usually wrote or worked 51 weeks a year, six days per week, nine hours a day, with an hour at noon for exercise and lunch. She never received more than \$100 per month—“less than a copyist in the City Hall would be paid.”

Frances spent more than 10 years in the Bancroft Library. She resigned in May 1889, enriched in knowledge and experience, but with impaired health and her name unfamiliar to a new generation of journalists who had replaced those who knew about her work. In 1890 Frances was back in the Pacific Northwest researching a new book. The railroads had changed everything. Her *Atlantis Arisen* in 1891 updated developments since her last survey 20 years before. Then Mrs. Victor wrote a history of Oregon’s early Indian wars, published by the state in 1894. She attended a Woman’s Congress in San Francisco that May as an Oregon delegate and honored guest. She remained in the Bay Area to recuperate and write. The press began to call her a “historian.” She also read her historical essays at meetings of the Pacific Coast Women’s Press Association, of which she was librarian-treasurer. Her own finances remained tenuous. She had only income from writing and a small federal pension. Friends in Oregon and California helped in various ways to sustain her.

Mrs. Victor was drawn back to Portland in June 1900 by the Oregon Historical Society’s new *Quarterly* magazine. She was paid for several articles there. Proceeds from a small poetry book that Frances self-published in 1900 helped her finance these projects. Mrs. Victor hoped to accumulate an emergency fund, but recurring illness hampered her efforts. She provided ideas for basic planning of the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition and continued her long effort to work out the questions and problems of Oregon history. Early on Friday, November 14, 1902, Frances Fuller Victor died peacefully from the effects of old age.



Herbert Howe Bancroft – 1882



Frances Fuller Victor – 1900

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Illustrations below from
The River of the West - 1870



Mountain Man Joe Meek

See also

A Bit of a Blue, The Life and Work of Frances Fuller Victor.
Jim Martin. Salem: Deep Well Publishing, 1992

PO Box 3588 Portland, OR 97208
encanto@ochcom.org www.ochcom.org

