

# MARTHA SUMMERHAYES: FRONTIER ARMY BRIDE

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*"The temperature was 122 degrees in the shade, the drinking water was 86 degrees, and the butter poured like oil. The spoiled food caused the refrigerator to stink indescribably, the meat turned green, and it was too hot to nap."*

So wrote Martha, or Mattie, Summerhayes, a young Army bride in the summer of 1874, who was traveling with her husband, Lt. Jack Summerhayes, by steamboat to his new duty station in Arizona.

Summerhayes was born Martha Dunham and raised as a prim and proper young debutante in a prosperous and prestigious New England family. As a young woman, she studied in Germany for two years and lived with the family of a high-ranking German officer. She mixed socially with the dashing militaristic Prussian officers, with their brilliant uniforms and chivalrous mannerisms. The romantic image of military life had its effect on the impressionable young lady from Nantucket. Not surprisingly, soon after her return to the States, she met and fell in love with a young lieutenant named John Summerhayes. Soon after their marriage, he was posted to Arizona.

In August of 1874, they traveled up the Colorado River in a paddle wheeler named the Gila, bound for his new duty station, Fort Apache. Before the arrival of the railroads to Arizona around 1880, the best way to get here was to go by ship from San Francisco down around Baja California and into the Sea of Cortez, then board a small steamboat paddling its way up the Colorado River to such river ports as Yuma, Ehren-

berg, Hardyville (today's Bullhead City), and Fort Mojave.

From these towns, it was a rigorous overland journey to the interior burghs and military posts. The journey up the Colorado to Fort Mojave took 18 days. Upon reaching Fort Mojave, the party boarded wagons and headed for Fort Whipple, near Prescott, where the higher-ranking officers and their wives remained. The next stop was Fort Verde, where more troops debarked, and then it was on to Fort Apache, in the heart of Apache country. Their journey took them over a narrow wagon road in an Army wagon up and across the Mogollon Rim. The rocky trail hadn't been designed for heavy wagons, and at each steep grade, the teamsters would pause long enough to figure a way to reach the summit. Then, amidst the cracking of whips and voluminous blasts of profanity, the durable, sure-footed mules leaned into the harness and pulled the wagons to the top.

"Each mule got its share of dreadful curses," Mattie wrote. "I had never heard or conceived of any oaths like those. . . . Each teamster had his own particular variety of oaths, each mule had a feminine name, and this brought the swearing down to a sort of personal basis."

Years of Christian upbringing in a Victorian society had convinced Mattie that "any moment the Almighty would strike the blasphemous teamsters dead.

"The teamsters always swore," Jack explained to his bride. "[The mules] wouldn't even stir to get up the hill, if they weren't



sworn at like that."

Eventually, she came to understand the handling of mules: "By the time we crossed the great Mogollon mesa, I had become used to those dreadful oaths, and learned to admire their skill, persistency, and endurance shown by those rough teamsters. I actually got so far as to believe what Jack had told me about swearing being necessary, for I saw impossible feats performed by the combination."

The young bride was pregnant at the time, making the trip even more uncomfortable, and a few months after her arrival, she gave birth to the first white child born in the region. Apache women, curious to see a white baby, came from miles around, bearing gifts.

Martha Summerhayes arrived in Arizona during those pristine days before the arrival of the railroads. A few short years later, she returned. This time, she was amazed to find herself traveling comfortably in a railroad car complete with white-linen tablecloths.

Mattie was an astute observer and wrote down many of her experiences, which she later published in a book she titled *Vanished Arizona*. Today, it's considered one of the best primary resources of Arizona's colorful territorial history. ■

