

# NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY



## THE MAIDEN'S GRAVE



Fall-Winter

June-December 1963

Volume VI

Numbers 3, 4

## NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Founded in 1904 for the purpose of investigating topics pertaining to the early history of Nevada and of collecting relics for a museum, the **NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY** has dedicated itself to the continuing purpose of preserving the rich heritage of the peoples—past and present—who have inhabited the land of Nevada.

The Society believes that it can best serve the State by arousing in the people a historical consciousness which it hopes will be carried to succeeding generations. Thus, through its Director, the Society sponsors an educational program which carries the history of Nevada to the schools and organizations throughout the State.

The Society maintains a library and museum where historical materials of many kinds are on display to the public and are available to students and scholars.

The Society publishes the **NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S QUARTERLY** which publishes articles of interest to readers in the social, cultural, economic, and political history of the Great Basin area: Nevada, eastern California, eastern and southern Oregon, Idaho, and Utah.

The Society's membership is open to the public; application for membership should be made to the Secretary of the Society, State Building, Reno, Nevada.

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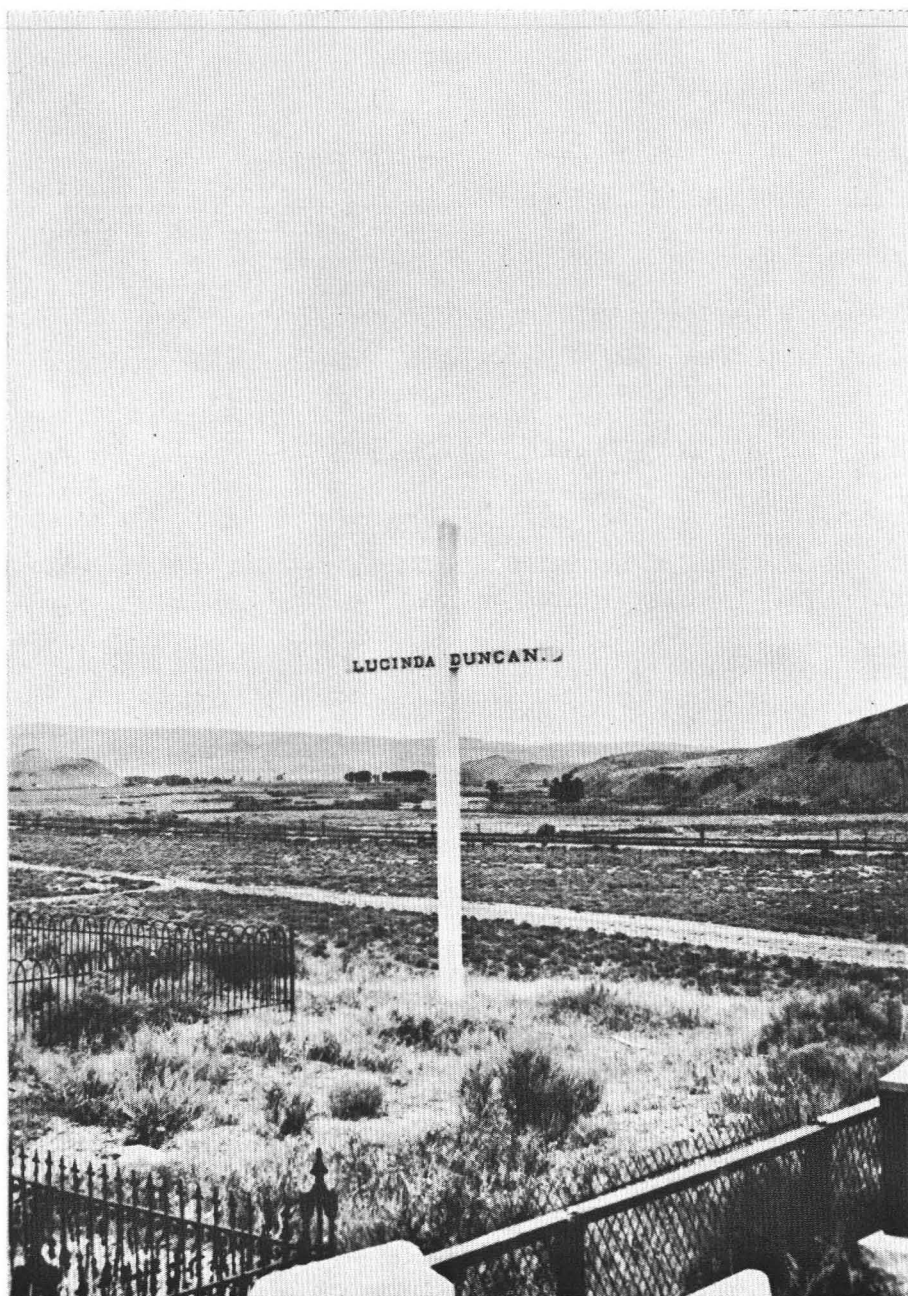
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The NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S QUARTERLY is published by the Nevada Historical Society, P. O. Box 1129, Reno, Nevada. Orders for memberships, change of address notices, and undeliverable copies should be addressed to the Society.

Second class mailing privileges authorized at Reno, Nevada.



The Maiden's Grave—Two miles east of Beowawe, Nevada

*Credit—Victor O. Goodwin, Humboldt River Basin Survey.*

## INTRODUCTION

Singly and in clusters, nameless graves pit the Humboldt Trail as it crosses the State of Nevada. Gravelly Ford and the area nearby were scenes of many an Indian-emigrant skirmish and natural death, for Death was a passenger on most of the wagon trains that passed this way.

This series of stories of the Maiden's Grave is not an attempt to debunk history but rather an effort to give a new version to a long-accepted story. The Nevada Historical Society leaves the choice to the reader—was Lucinda Duncan a young girl or was she a grandmother leading her family west?

The first two stories are reprints. The first from *The Pacific Tourist Guide*, copyrighted in 1879 by Henry T. Williams; the second is from *The Southern Pacific Bulletin*, May 1958. The last is the story of Lucinda Duncan as told by her granddaughter, Mrs. Iva Rader, Oakland, California.

PACIFIC TOURIST GUIDE  
1879

## THE MAIDEN'S GRAVE

There is hardly an old resident on this coast, but who has some incident to relate in reference to Gravelly Ford. It was not only an excellent crossing place, but it was also a fine camping place, where both man and beast could recruit after the weary days on the dreary plains. There were wide bottom lands that offered excellent grazing for stock, and the small brush along the banks of the stream gave excellent shade and firewood. On a low point of land that juts out toward the river on the south side of the track, (Central Pacific) and just below this ford, is the Maiden's Grave. Tradition has it that she was one of a party of emigrants from Missouri, and that, at this ford, while they were in camp, she sickened and died. Her loving friends laid her away to rest in a grave on this point of land, in plain sight of the ford and of the valley for miles in either direction. But while her remains were crumbling into dust, and she, too, was fading from the memory of all, perhaps, but her immediate relatives, the railroad builders came along, and found the low mound, and the decayed headboard which marked her resting place. With that admiration of, and devotion to woman, which characterizes American citizens of even humble origin, they made a new grave and surrounded it with an enclosure—a picket fence, painted white—and by the side of it erected a cross, the emblem of the Christian's faith, which bears on one side, this legend—"The Maiden's Grave"—and on the other, her name, "Lucinda Duncan." All honor to the men whose respect for the true woman led them to the performance of this praiseworthy act—an act which would have been performed by no race under the heavens, but ours; and not by them, indeed, to the remains, under similar circumstances, of a representative of the sterner sex. The location of this grave is near Beowawe, and the point is now used as a burial ground by the people living in the vicinity. Passing the point where the grave is located, an extended valley comes in from the left, south of which extends the Cortez Range of mountains.

SOUTHERN PACIFIC  
BULLETIN  
1958



## WE KEEP ALIVE A LEGEND OF THE MAIDEN'S GRAVE

*Reprinted by special permission from the Southern Pacific Company,  
San Francisco, California*

Just outside Beowawe, Nevada, on a hill covered with twisted sagebrush there is a grave—The Maiden's Grave.

The story of Lucinda Duncan, the young maiden who was laid to rest on this lonely hill, is a legend in railroading and Nevada history. And, as in all legends, many questions remain unanswered.

How old was Lucinda? Some of the oldtimers say 13, others add a few years, but most agree she was in her teens.

### **No One Knows Now**

How did she die? No one knows for sure. She was but one of many who lost their lives traveling in covered wagons over the Overland Trail in the mid-1800's. The most imaginative belief is that she was massacred by the Indians, but history would deem more true that her death was caused by pneumonia or another of the diseases brought on by the hardships the pioneers suffered as they journeyed westward.

Here the legend ends and facts begin.

### **She Was Given Tribute**

When the men of our railroad (then the Central Pacific) were building the Overland Route, they noticed the grave near the track site. On the small marker beside it was carved only the name—Lucinda Duncan.

The men—among them Indians who worked for us—cleaned the area around the grave and surrounded it with a white picket fence. They constructed a cross and inscribed on one side of it "The Maiden's Grave" and on the other, her name.

From that time on, the section gangs took special interest in the solitary grave beside the track. They kept it clean, and from time to time they would pick flowers and bring them to the grave, a tribute to the young pioneer maiden whose journey ended before she reached the promised land of California.

### **Her Body Was Moved**

In 1906, when the old Central Pacific route was realigned, it was found the new route would pass directly through the grave area. Again doing the gentle thing, our men moved the maiden's grave

to a small pioneer cemetery located on a hill a few hundred yards from the track.

By this time the story of the Maiden's Grave had become a legend, not only to railroaders but to travelers riding our trains along the Overland Route. Conductors pointed out the little cemetery to passengers and told them the story of Lucinda Duncan. The stories weren't always the same but that doesn't matter—imagination is the soul of legend.

It was not long before the railroaders' devoted care of Lucinda's grave became a part of the legend. But the SP men did not stop caring for the grave. In 1950 they decided to replace the aged cross with a large one which could be seen easily by passengers on our trains. . . .

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## IVA RADER'S STORY

Mrs. Rader's version of the Lucinda Duncan legend was brought to the attention of the Nevada Historical Society by her grandnephew William Robertson of San Leandro, California.



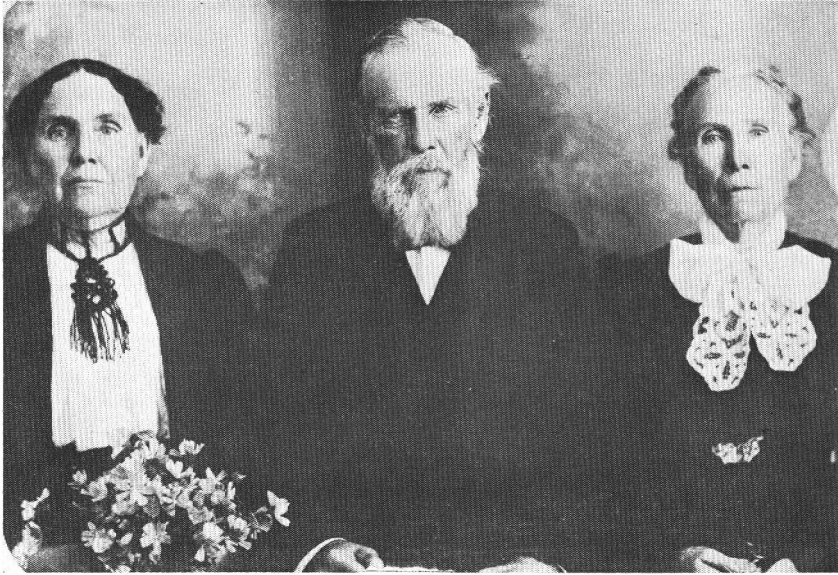
Mrs. Iva Robertson Rader, granddaughter of Lucinda Duncan.  
Picture taken about 1892.

## IVA RADER'S STORY

"Lucinda Duncan was my grandmother.

"I have known the story of her death all my life. I heard it from my mother, Melinda Duncan Thompson Robertson, and from my half sisters. All who told it to me were on the wagon train with Lucinda coming west to California in the spring of 1863.

"I have told it several times to feature writers and it has been published once or twice. My story has never replaced the legend.



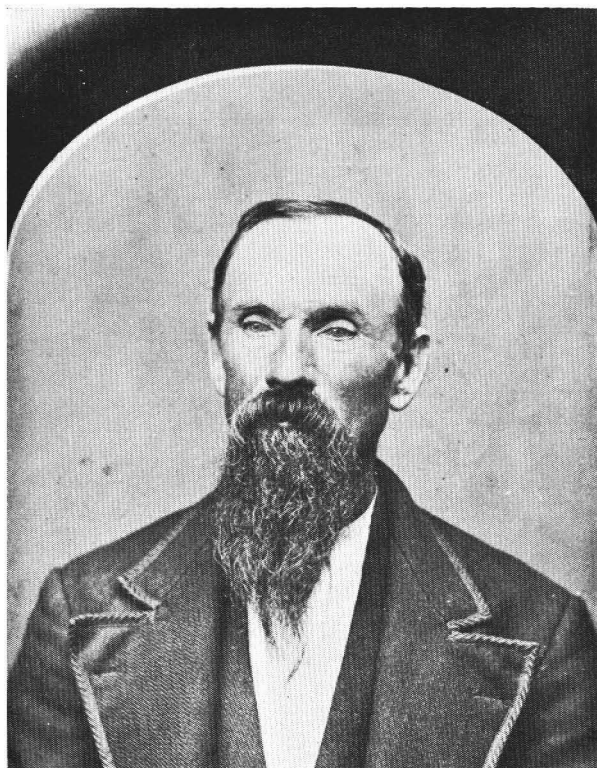
Lydia Frost, John Duncan and Melinda Thompson, all children of Lucinda Duncan and on the wagon train.

"Lucinda Duncan was not a young girl of 17 or 18. She was a grandmother of 70 and she died near the Humboldt River with her children and grandchildren about her. Let me tell you her story.

"Grandmother Duncan was born in Virginia about 1793. I do not know her maiden name but her family was of Dutch extraction. Her husband was a Scot and his first name was Nimrod. All of the children of Lucinda and Nimrod Duncan were born in Virginia with the exception of my mother. They had eight children. Polly, the first, died in infancy.

"The Duncans moved to Kentucky and then on to Richmond, the county seat of Ray County, Missouri, where my mother Melinda was born.

"Nimrod Duncan died before the family decided to come west. Like so many other men, when the news of gold in California reached him, he left to make a fortune for his family. He took his son William with him but the rest of the children and his wife



William Duncan, Lucinda's son who had gone to California with his father and returned to Missouri.

stayed home. A very few families made the California trip in 1849. The trip was made 'around the horn.' He died in the goldfields and William came back to Missouri.

"Perhaps the stories he brought home with him gave the Duncan family the idea to go west, I don't know.

"Let me tell you about the train. There were forty wagons that left Missouri that spring—all Duncans. They were well provisioned. They took all of their stock for meat, cattle and milch

cows. Hogs were slaughtered and the meat smoked. They had heard how the Indians begged for food from the wagon trains so extra flour and sugar were included with the provisions. All of these extras were carried in a separate wagon. My mother, Melinda, said their party had no Indian trouble. Whenever Indians



Martha Alice, granddaughter of Lucinda Duncan,  
was 10 years old when the trip west began.

begged for food, it was freely given. They never attempted any viciousness, just took the food and went away.

"My grandmother, Lucinda Duncan, headed the wagons. She was the revered one and they gave her the place of honor. Then too, they knew there would be less dust at the head of the train.

"Who was the wagon master? I do not know. Maybe it was William, he had been west in 1849 with his father.

"I shall tell you about some of the members of the party. My mother was a widow of 33, Melinda Duncan Thompson. Her husband had been killed in an accident at a Confederate military post early in the war. She had four small daughters with her. They were Lottie (Charlotte Adeline) aged 10 years; Lizzie



Lizzie (Anna Elizabeth) Thompson was 8 years of age when her mother Melinda joined the party.

(Anna Elizabeth) aged 8 years; Martha Alice, aged 5 years and Cora Nancy, aged 3 years. I am Lucinda Duncan's granddaughter by my mother's second husband, David Green Robertson.

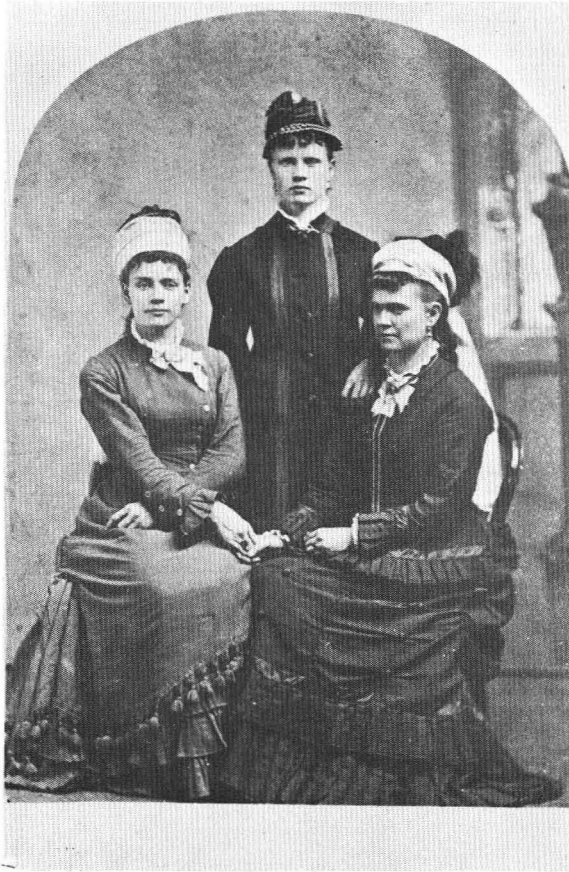
"Lucinda's oldest son John was in the train also. He was married to a sister of my mother's husband, Thompson. Her maiden name was Adeline Thompson. They had three children, all with them.



"William Duncan was unmarried. He was a bachelor all his life.

"My uncle Joseph and his wife Sarah came with their three children, a girl and two boys. I remember the oldest boy's name, it was Keltz.

"I do not remember Lottie's (Charlotte) married name but I



Elizabeth, Cora and Lottie, daughters of Melinda Thompson, made the trip with their Grandmother Lucinda Duncan as children.

do know she was married. She had married at 15 and never had any children.

"Lucinda's daughter Lydia had been married twice. Her first husband was named William Shaw. He must have been well to do as he owned slaves. She was married to a man named Frost when she joined the train. They brought their three children with them—Charles, William and Jessie.

"Lydia had a slave with her named Washington. They called him Wash and Lydia's first husband had paid \$600 for him. When she married Frost and they planned to come west, Wash told her he would run away and meet the train 'on the other side of the Platte.' He was there when the wagons reached that camp ground. My mother told me Washington died somewhere in Nevada, Carson Valley, I think.

"My mother also told me that Lucinda left an old hound dog behind in Missouri, forgotten or on purpose, I do not know. The second day out he caught up with the train. His feet were in bad shape but Lucinda took care of him and from then on he rode with her in her 'carriage.'

"I do not know the date my grandmother died but I do know what killed her. It was an aneurism of the heart. Her wagon was the first to arrive at the Humboldt River. She had her driver stop a little above the Ford. Gravelly Ford was well known to the people who crossed the plains. It was a watering place and was on the regular route.

"The rest of the Duncan train began coming up about dusk. Grandmother told her driver she was tired of the wagon and wanted to walk down to the river. She left the wagon and walked about 100 yards when she felt 'something give 'way' in her side. She did not go back to her wagon but waited until it caught up to her. She told the driver to tell the rest of the party to make camp as soon as they could because she was ill.

"The family made her comfortable in her wagon. She lived that night and all of the next day. She died the second night.

"My mother told me 'she was conscious at all times and uncomplaining. When she knew she was going to die, she told the family she was disappointed—"I wanted to see you all settled".'

"After she passed away they buried her there, above the river on a small knoll so the water in flood would not reach the grave. Someone made a headboard of walnut from a piece of furniture. It had her name and dates on it. The following day the train moved on.

"I think there were no more incidents on the trip into Steamboat Springs (Nevada). The party stopped there before going into Washoe Valley and on to Carson City. Steamboat Springs had a big hotel and a number of houses. It is all gone now—I saw it a few years ago.

"While the train rested at Steamboat, my mother re-married. This man was my father and his name was David Robertson.

Many widows married during the journey west. It was hard for a woman with little children.

"I think some of my mother's family settled in Nevada. I'm not sure, but my father brought his wife and her four daughters to



David Green Robertson married Melinda Duncan Thompson at Steamboat Springs, Nevada in 1864 as the wagon train made its way to California. He was the father of Mrs. Iva Rader.

Surprise Valley, California. That is where my oldest brother was born, Charles Todd Robertson.

"Mr. Robertson was a wandering kind of man. He was a contractor in timber. Whenever or wherever he found work, he took

his family and moved. I was born in Humboldt County, California, above Arcadia, on a cattle ranch, November 17, 1873.

"To go back to Lucinda Duncan, the family never did re-mark the grave. I heard when the railroad first came through (Central Pacific) they found the grave. By that time she had been there so long all they could read on the headboard was the name, everything else was worn away. They (the railroad crews) didn't know who she was or where her family had settled so they didn't try to locate us. If the railroad had found any Duncans the story would have been correct from the start.

"I have always been grateful that they cleared the grave and put a cross with her name over it."

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Iva Rader". The signature is written in dark ink and has a fluid, elegant style.

*Taped in Oakland, California*

*November 20, 1963 by Marion Welliver*

SPO, CARSON CITY, NEVADA, 1963

