

## CHAPTER 1

# he Road to Fort Scott

Iowa was in winter's icy grip when Celia Ann Blaylock entered this world in January 1850,<sup>1</sup> the third child and second daughter of Henry Blaylock (1817–1877) and Elizabeth “Betsy” Vance Blaylock (1825–1899). Henry and Betsy had come to Iowa from Indiana about 1846, had obtained a farm eight miles south of Fairfax, and through hard work and no small sacrifice were developing it into a paying proposition. For the next eighteen years Celia, called Celie by family and friends, called the farm home until one fateful day in 1868 when she and her younger sister Sarah<sup>2</sup> (1853–1906) ran away to discover the world.<sup>3</sup> What they ultimately discovered was likely not what either had expected.

Family sources indicate Celia's reason for running away was to escape strict parental discipline. Henry and Betsy subscribed to the fundamentalist concept that children be allowed little leeway. Timeworn adages “Spare the rod and spoil the child” and “Children should be seen and not heard” were taken literally. Such discipline was not at all out of line in the 1860s. Indeed, it was advocated — and practiced — by religious leaders and school authorities. At Sunday school she was instructed in Biblical parables and taught that the Ten Commandments must be her guide.

Celia was schooled to the standards of the era. She attended the local schoolhouse where she learned to read and write. She read books about large towns and great cities and she wanted to live the adventures such places provided. She dreamed of

stylish clothes and of dwelling in a large house. For Celia a little education would prove dangerous.

The Blaylock farm was in no way isolated. Located near a main wagon road passing strangers often stopped to ask for directions and a cup of cool water. If they seemed hungry food was offered, for it was an age when strangers were not turned away.

It was also an age when neighbors helped each other and were cordial. Several farms approximated the Blaylock acreage, and social gatherings, community picnics and barn dances were held from time to time. The Blaylock girls enjoyed dancing, so when the fiddles struck the first notes they joined the squares. Celia's early teen years were not devoid of social contact.

Henry's canvas-topped buggy and sturdy horses eased the burden of travel. From spring to autumn the family made regular trips to Fairfax to purchase supplies and renew acquaintances. The family was not unknown in Fairfax.

It was also an age of early marriage. Females married, on average, at seventeen; males a few years older. The eldest Blaylock daughter, Martha Jane, followed the trend. When she was seventeen she married Charles Probst. The wedding ceremony was performed on July 01, 1860. Ten-year-old Celia and eight-year-old Sarah were both in attendance.

Both Celia and Sarah inevitably attracted the attentions of young farm lads. By age fifteen Celia had become an attractive girl of medium complexion with auburn tresses that were usually kept in long ringlets. Sarah was prettier than Celia. Of a fairer complexion her long, sandy-blond hair was usually in braids. Both girls were of average height, about five feet, three inches. Both could turn on the charms if they wished, but there is no indication either was overly flirtatious. In fact family sources suggest Celia generally ignored her would-be suitors for, according to them, she considered farm life so boring she harbored no desire whatever to become a farmer's wife. She foresaw little joy in a lifetime spent toiling in the fields, tending snorting hogs and milking cows. Producing a child every two or three years was not on her agenda either.

Sarah apparently shared her sister's loathing of farm life. There seems little doubt that neither intended to marry into a farm family, regardless of wealth or acreage owned, although Sarah eventually did. Life, the girls decided at an early age, had more to offer. Meanwhile, they did their chores, attended the social events, teased the boys, and dreamed of the day they would escape. Such dreams, however, were one thing and reality quite another, so as time passed the dream remained only in their minds.

Then one day in 1868 the opportunity to bolt hearth and home presented itself and the two threw their destinies to the fickle winds of fate and were gone. Celia's baby sister, Tony May, who passed down the family history to her children and grandchildren, indicated that her sisters left very suddenly. Because she was only two years old at the time, her details are sketchy<sup>4</sup> and the month of their departure remains unknown. Tony May probably learned a certain amount from Sarah, whose memory of the events would naturally be selective; and she would also glean details from her parents who would also censor forbidden information. It seems unlikely the girls left prior to March or as late as October. Even in 1868 teenage girls were not inclined to leave home with winter's grip still on the land or the north wind readying once again to drive autumn into exile.

As in many cases of this sort the decision to flee may have been little more than two girls balking at the idea of spending another humid summer amidst corn rows while fighting off wasps, gnats, hornets, mosquitoes and voracious horseflies. That they left without financial help or parental approval seems unquestionable, especially the latter, considering the bitter reception Sarah received when, months later, she presented herself at the farmhouse door, thoroughly chastened, deeply remorseful and begging forgiveness.

While the circumstances of departure are not fully known it is certain they had run away knowingly trading the security of hearth and home for uncertain futures. The road they chose led them to different ends. Mattie's road, however circuitous, led to an early grave while Sarah's path made a U-turn. Af-

ter about a year Sarah became disillusioned and returned in cheerless homecoming to her outraged parents, shocked relatives and tongue-wagging neighbors.<sup>5</sup> Henry and Betsy took Sarah back, but held her in disgrace. For all concerned she was “spoiled goods.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether the girls had given any thought to destination or employment is also unknown. Destination may not have been a high priority, but they had little time to decide their means of support. By virtue of experience in household chores they may have sought work as seamstresses or laundry workers. It is known that Mattie was a reasonably skilled seamstress, but whether she was skilled enough for employment is not known. They might also have sought work as cooks, perhaps in a camp setting as many buffalo hunters and woodcutters worked from camps. Perhaps they sought work as maids in some town’s hotel. They may have enquired about employment in cafes. Whatever they may have applied for, they quickly discovered their chances of finding worthwhile employment was poor. The labor pool for women in the west of 1868 was neither wide nor deep. A dollar for a ten-hour workday was a normal wage and the workweek was six days. They would have quickly discovered the west was not a worker’s paradise.

Logic suggests they proceeded west immediately. Horace Greeley’s oft-misquoted advice to the nation’s youth, “Go west young man and grow with the country”<sup>7</sup> also held appeal for young women. Both girls knew their choices of destination were hardly narrow. Five large centers, strung north to south along the Kansas/Iowa/Missouri boundaries gave them a deal of latitude. Kansas towns of Atchison, Lawrence, Fort Scott and Leavenworth, Iowa’s Ohio City and Missouri’s Kansas City and Lamar<sup>8</sup> were all bustling with post-war activity, but offered little work for women.

Fort Scott may have originally figured in their plans. An essential stop on the trail west, and the chief commercial center for nearby Lamar, the town was booming with westbound pilgrims. It would hold attractions for two young women seeking their fortunes. That, added to other clues available, makes it a

very logical destination. There is, however, no indication that Fort Scott was an immediate choice.

In fact, there is nothing suggesting Sarah was ever there at all; and no local records indicate Mattie's presence until 1871 when her residency is established because she attended a photographer's studio to pose for a photo. In fact there are no records to indicate where the pair had been during their months together. Wherever they ventured in 1868 and 1869, they traveled quietly and stayed out of trouble. What had the girls been up to and where had Mattie been between the day she said goodbye to Sarah and the day she posed for her photo? No one has yet determined the definitive answer to either question.<sup>9</sup> For Mattie the months between 1868 and 1871 form a black hole into which she slipped to remain completely out of sight in the silence of time.

Celia may have already begun calling herself Mattie, but it appears throughout her life to have had little more than occasional use. Court records, always a good yardstick, indicate that for the most part she continued to call herself by her childhood name. However, her Iowan enunciation caused Celie to sound like Sally and court clerks who listened and wrote at the same time were disposed towards phonetic spelling. Spelling was secondary so they wrote what they heard and, as a result, police and court records list her as Sally.

She never once appears in court records as Mattie.

Her use of an alias was undoubtedly for one or more of the same reasons that most sporting women used them: they were necessary in order to remain as unknown as possible, to hinder searches by concerned family members, to avoid lawmen with outstanding warrants, or even to spare bringing shame to the family name. Why she chose Mattie remains unknown, but it suggests she determined her means of making a living soon after she left home.<sup>10</sup> It is her proven means of livelihood from 1872 to 1876 and from 1883 to 1888 plus the other twists and turns in her life that have more than just coincidental significance.



1. Reports that Celia Ann's birthplace was Fairfax are incorrect. Fairfax (Fairfax Township, Linn County) was the nearest town so she was registered there. The registration reveals she was born at her home in Monroe Township, Johnson County. [Iowa Historical Society]
2. Mattie's other siblings were Martha Jane (1843–1872), Marion (1848–1868), William (1855–1878) and Tony May (1867–1941). Marion served in the Union Army and was wounded, which led to his early death. With the exception of Tony May, none of the children lived long lives.
3. Some writers of western lore have stated that Mattie left home in 1866 at age sixteen. Mattie was three years older than her sister so, in 1866, Sarah was still only thirteen. 1868 is in keeping as the year of departure. [US Census figures, Johnson County, 1860.]
4. Information about Sarah was obtained from Tony May's granddaughter, Tony Gene Vynsand, who also gave insight into Mattie's home situation. Mrs. Vynsand was extremely helpful and very generous in her assistance. [Phone conversations with author in 2003.]
5. Nine years later, on 14 May 1878, in Linn County Iowa, Sarah married Hiram Marquis, a widowed farmer twenty-six years her senior. They were drawn to each other through circumstance and situation. In him she found a reasonable man who treated her kindly and provided a decent life. He found in her a wife who presented him with a son, Hiram Oswald (1879–1952). Marquis, like most widowers, was lonely, but his age thwarted his chances of marrying a woman of childbearing age. The family appears in the 1880 census as Sarah, age 27, Hiram, age 53 and Hiram Oswald, age 1. [1880 US Census. Linn County, Iowa.]
6. A nineteenth century expression indicating a woman of lost virtue. [*Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*]
7. Greeley neither originated the term, nor is it what he wrote. John Balsone Soule of Indiana, publisher of the *Terre Haute Express*, had earlier written, "Go west young man." Greeley liked the words and added, "and there build up a home and future." He put it into an editorial and, like many catchy phrases, public usage soon condensed it to its present state. Greeley tried to credit Soule, but received no response to his efforts.
8. Lamar is not likely to have been on their list as their mother had close relatives there. They would not have wanted to encounter any of them. [K. Lanning. Email October 2004.]
9. Sarah reappears in The Johnson County 1870 Census, but Celia Ann of course does not. That census was compiled in October. The section for Sarah's last address is blank. Sarah's age is listed as 17, a further indication she had not yet turned 16 when she left. [US Census 1870. Vol. 121, p414, Line 12.]
10. A survey taken by Joe Snell of the Kansas Historical Society shows the favored aliases of Old West prostitutes. The top three were Mattie, Hattie and Fannie in that order. (Others were Minnie, Bessie and Flossie). [Boyer, Glenn. *Wyatt Earp: Facts* vol.3, p21.]