

Ma Bradley

Susie Clementine grew up in the Sierra Nevada on the North Fork of the American River near Auburn, California. Her father was a gold miner and raised Susie alone because her mother had died during childbirth. She was a wild spirit who ran free in the forest and along the trails of the American River Canyon. Her father was busy mining gold and didn't have time for her. She never went to school and only learned to read words from the cans, boxes, and bags of groceries her father brought home from his monthly trips to the old railroad town of Colfax.

When she turned sixteen her father allowed her to accompany him to town one day. While he was busy getting provisions, she met a fellow in town by the name of Bradley. His father had been a bigwig in the Army during WWII. In fact, the U.S. Army had named a tank after him. Omar Jr. was his name and a good time was his game. He was at least twenty years older than Susie, but she was attracted to him.

When Susie and her dad returned to his mine, Susie told Omar she'd be back in a month and she'd like to see him again. So, for the next year they met once a month when her dad came to town. Eventually, Susie and Omar got interested in getting married and looked for someone to marry them. It turned out that a young, new pastor had recently moved to Grass Valley, California from Dallas, Texas and might be willing to marry them.

One Saturday in August Omar met Susie in Colfax and talked her into accompanying him to Grass Valley where they coerced the new pastor, Dan Iles, to marry them. They spent their wedding night at the historic Bret Harte Hotel in Nevada City. Bret Harte who was the namesake for the hotel, was considered one of the best-known American writers of the 19th century. The author, essayist, humorist, and critic wrote "The Luck of Roaring Camp," one of his first and most successful works. Mark Twain spent several nights in this hotel as well.

After their brief honeymoon the Bradleys moved into Omar's small room in Colfax. But, their wedded bliss didn't last long because, unknown to Susie, Omar had been robbing local banks in Sacramento, Placerville, and Roseville. This was

probably why he had been able to afford the cost of staying in the Bret Harte Hotel on their honeymoon. During one of the robberies Omar had also killed a bank guard.

The State Police and FBI surrounded the Bradley's rooming house and nabbed Omar when he returned from a trip casing another bank job in Auburn. The capture went down without incident, but Susie was traumatized by the entire episode. She had no idea her new husband was a bank robber or had killed someone.

Omar was convicted of bank robbery and first-degree murder and sentenced to fifty years in Folsom Prison twenty miles downstream from Auburn on the American River. Susie had no friends and no place to go but back home to live with her dad at his gold mine.

For about a year Susie and her dad resumed their lifestyle with her as cook and him bringing home groceries from Colfax. Susie, now ridiculed by her father as Ma Bradley, was no longer allowed to go to town with him. She resented the name her father gave her and the constraints of not being allowed to leave the Canyon. Her only freedom came by hiking along the trail up the Canyon, some thirty miles, to the Royal Gorge and back. She made this trek almost weekly, becoming familiar with every tree and rock along the river.

This cloistered existence might have continued for years if a major event hadn't occurred one night at Folsom Prison. Johnny Cash performed his famous concert at Folsom Prison after serving several years there himself for drug possession. The night after Cash's performance Omar escaped.

He traveled upstream from the prison avoiding his pursuers and looking for Susie, who he knew lived somewhere near the Foresthill-Colfax bridge which crossed the American River. He spent almost a week searching for her, being careful not to reveal his presence. He finally located Susie and her father one evening while they were eating dinner. He could see his wife by candlelight through the window of their cabin.

Omar burst into the cabin demanding Susie join him in fleeing California and the police. She was horrified by the thought and her father raced to get his shotgun to run this convict and daughter stealer out of his house. A major battle ensued

between Omar and the two enraged Clementines. At some point in the conflict Susie's father's shotgun went off, igniting a barrel of gun powder stored in the cabin, destroying it, killing Omar and Susie's father, and seriously injuring Susie. Susie's face was disfigured, and her arms completely blown off.

When the police and EMTs arrived, they found only splinters remaining of the cabin and body parts everywhere. After searching around the area, they found what was left of Susie and two arms at the edge of the river. She had apparently been thrown clear of the cabin and landed in the ice-cold water.

Susie was still alive but would need a lot of reconstructive surgery and rest. One of the EMTs had almost completed his medical training to be a surgeon and suggested it might be possible to immediately sew the two arms they found onto Susie's shoulders because they had been kept cool and moist in the river. Unfortunately, the two arms weren't hers. They were longer, more muscular, and were hairier than hers were before the explosion.

Susie was still unconscious, so they couldn't ask her for permission to sew the arms on. The surgically-trained EMT decided to go ahead and perform the surgery because he figured Susie would prefer malformed arms to no arms at all. Susie was transported to a hospital in San Francisco where she was admitted as Mrs. Omar Bradley, or just, "Ma Bradley."

After a year of reconstructive surgery to her face and body, Ma Bradley was released to return to her dad's gold claim on the American River between Colfax and Forest Hill. To remain in the Canyon, she had to rebuild her dad's old cabin. Her new arms came in handy for this work. They were strong and powerful, and, as it turned out, her left arm was her dad's and her right arm was Omar's. It was odd, but strangely reassuring, having the living mementos of her father and husband.

For over a year Susie had been becoming more and more disturbed and angry about the turn of events in her life after discovering her new husband was a robber and a murderer. She recounted the sequence of events in her life from Omar being sentenced to fifty years in Folsom Prison to her spending a year in the hospital recuperating.

All these injuries and trauma began to twist Ma Bradley's thinking and caused her to look for a scape goat on which to focus her anger. While making her weekly trek up the American River to the area called the Royal Gorge, she began working on a project to use the excess energy caused by her anger and frustration. She used a pickax to dig a groove in the solid rock of the river and create a water slide. It was about three feet wide, two to three feet deep, and over fifty feet long. At the low end the water flowing through the new slide cascaded over a small waterfall into a pool below. She chipped the rock carefully, so the trench was smooth, allowing a person to "Ride the Slide" from top to bottom without fear of injury to the gluteus maximus. She called her creation, "Ma Bradley's Slide."

In the summer of 1975, the year after being discharged from the hospital, she discovered a group of backpackers camped on the sand bar near "Ma Bradley's Slide." It looked like the group intended to stay for several nights, so she chose to observe their activities for the day and evening hidden back in the trees. As she listened to the conversations, she learned that it was a youth group from Calvary Bible Church in Grass Valley, California. There were several leaders and about thirty high school and college students. As she studied the kids and the leaders, she suddenly recognized the pastor who had married her and Omar two years before.

Her confused mind began to build an explanation for the cause of all her pain and suffering over the past two years. If she hadn't married Omar, none of the horrible events in her life would have occurred -- her dad wouldn't have been killed, she wouldn't have been blown up and lost her arms, she wouldn't have had these hairy arms sown onto her shoulders, and she wouldn't be living in the forest like some wild animal! And, the reason she had married Omar was because this pastor leading the youth group had married her! He was the cause of all her pain and suffering!

As Ma Bradley grew angrier and angrier, sitting there among the trees, she was astounded to hear the young pastor relating her history to the youth group around the campfire. Somehow, he was aware of all the events she had lived through. And, he made the story sound horrible, with her losing her arms in the explosion and long, hairy arms being sown back on.

And apparently, he was telling her story, like a ghost story, to scare the younger campers. He even selected some of the older campers, who had heard the story the previous year, to sneak off into the woods and rush into the campsite yelling and screaming at the climax of the story.

Ma Bradley sat and thought about this odd turn of events. She began to realize that she had become famous in this neck of the woods for enduring an incredible injustice. She liked the feeling of being a legend.

So, the next year when she found another group of backpackers camped at the sandbar in Royal Gorge, she hid in the trees when her story was told around the campfire on the last night and joined the older campers in screaming and shouting to scare the newbies by running through the camp with them at the end of the story.

Ma Bradley has now been joining the senior campers in running out of the woods and through the campsite, for over forty years, as Pastor Iles has led back packing groups from Calvary Bible Church, Combie Bible Church, First Baptist Church of Pollock Pines, and many others who've joined them. So, if you're privileged to be asked to help scare the new campers at Royal Gorge someday, keep an eye out for a disfigured woman with long, hairy arms, running beside you into camp, screaming and yelling at the climax of the Ma Bradley story!