

*Continued from page 1* - There are several versions of the story, but none are well documented. All agree that "Susan" is Susan O'Brien, a teenage daughter of an emigrant family travelling the Carson Trail. Susan died tragic death at the bluff site. The most dramatic version comes from an article in a portfolio of historic paintings published by Harold's Club in 1964. According to this source, the O'Brien family was in a party of 40 wagons and 50 head of cattle on the California Trail.

During the wagon train's stop at Goose Creek, the story says a few Indians appeared at the camp while the men of the party were out hunting. Believing they wanted provisions, the women offered the natives food. However, they were looking for whiskey and things became ugly. According to the tale, a 15 year old girl, Susan O'Brien, grabbed two of her family's guns and pointed them at the unwelcome intruders. The Indians backed away and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. The incident quickly faded in memory as the Forty-Mile Desert loomed ahead of them.

The O'Briens and their party made it through the desert and decided to take the Carson River cutoff of the Carson Trail. (Approximately one third of the emigrants took this route.) According to this version of the story, the O'Brien family was in the advance party of the wagon train as they followed the Carson River into a canyon just above the river ford where they would cross. It was here Indians, assumed to be Paiutes once again, ambushed the small group. Susan witnessed the brutal murder of her father, mother and 12 year old brother in the surprise attack.

Thinking quickly, she hid herself in a trunk, hoping to be overlooked. The Indians left nothing unturned and eventually found the frightened girl's hiding place. Here the article turns dramatic—Susan is dragged from the trunk. With her dress torn and her hair hanging loose, she is thrown, scratched and bleeding into a cave on the top of the bluff to await her fate.

That night, as her guards slept, she made a terrified dash to escape. The guards quickly awoke and came tearing after her. Realizing she would surely be recaptured and face a "fate worse than death" as an Indian slave, Susan made a desperate decision. She dashed headlong to the edge of the bluff and threw herself over to certain death on the jagged volcanic rocks below.

The story continues that passing wagon trains found her body and buried her at the foot of the cliff and named it "Susan's Bluff".

A less exciting, but perhaps more factual recounting of the story is found in the *Third Biennial Report of the Nevada Historical Society, 1911-1912*. This publication listed the names and origins of locations and sites in several western Nevada counties, including Lyon County where Susan's Bluff is located. The report states "At its foot are the graves of three emigrants with a sunken wagon tire at the head of each grave the name of one of the emigrants was Susan, hence the name of the bluff." This information is credited to Mr. C.M. Davis of Carson City. Trails West historian, Don Buck, reports that this is the earliest reference he's found naming the location as Susan's bluff. None of the 325 emigrant diary entries he has for the Carson Trail refers to the bluff by this name, though.

Recently, Laura Tennant, a Dayton, NV historian and columnist for the Fernley Leader, published an article tracing the history of Susan's Bluff. She found much the same information, but also talked to Curtis Harnar, a Pyramid Lake Paiute, who had a slightly different version of the story.

Harnar told her that his ancestors' version "is the same, except that Susan was taken to the top of the bluff to be held for ransom, hopefully for rifles." There Indian women there were busy preparing a meal. Susan began demanding to be released and defiantly threw an Indian woman's mano and metate (mortar and pestle grinding stone used for grinding grain into meal) over the cliff. The woman became so angry she threw Susan over the cliff. Indian women, Harnar explained, spent much effort honing their mano and metate cooking implements and valued them immensely.

He ended his story with a thought provoking conclusion: "The white people assumed Susan jumped to 'save her honor' but they weren't there to tell the real story and 'assumed' the story's details. We were there as witnesses to what really happened."

Whether Susan jumped of her own volition, or was thrown, the imposing cliff named for her is a stark reminder of the sudden perils and dangers that faced our emigrant forebears at every turn. It's also a reminder of the importance of documenting these trails and the records of them left behind by the emigrants, so another generation won't have to wonder "which is the right story? ~