
**FROM IDAHO COUNTY'S MOST
ROMANTIC CHARACTER
POLLY BEMIS
TO REFLECT THE TRADITIONAL
CHINESE WOMEN'S
CHARACTERISTICS**

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War and poverty in China led many Chinese to emigrate to America in the mid-nineteenth century. Discouraged from traveling abroad by cultural mores that shackled them to the home, economic considerations, and anti-Chinese sentiment in the American West, few women were among these early immigrants. The women who did brave the arduous voyage across the Pacific Ocean arrived to face an alien and often hostile environment. Many were brought to America and forced into prostitution, virtual slaves who lived under brutal conditions that few survived. Wives brought over to join their husbands, whether they settled in urban Chinatowns or rural areas, suffered harsh living conditions and discrimination because of their race and sex. Courageous and resilient, these pioneering women blazed a trail for those who followed.

Perhaps no one person in Idaho Country has evoked more interest than the Chinese woman, Polly Bemis --- Polly Bemis, the Chinese slave girl, who married a white man and lived in central Idaho for sixty-two years, loved and respected by all. The story is clouded with romantic rumors. This attractive Chinese girl seems to have attained national fame. Requests for pictures or information about her have come from New York City, Denver, Tacoma, Spokane, Ashley Falls, Massachusetts; from Oregon, from Pocatello.

Polly, originally known as Lulu Nathoy, was born on September 11, 1853, in the north of China

near the Mongolian border where brigands for centuries had been sweeping down to raid the countryside,¹ Her family was very poor, farming a small plot of ground and when they weren't suffering from the plundering of brigands, their crops were burning up with drought. There came a year of great famine, when there was not only the drought but the outlaws galloped down out of the north and stripped the farmers of what little grain there was, leaving them destitute.

To keep the rest of the family from starvation, Lalu's father traded her to the brigands in exchange for enough seed to plant another crop. She was sold to an outfit that shipped women slaves to the New World. Polly came from China to Warren when in her nineteenth year (some parties mention that probably eighteenth year), she arrived by saddle horse from Portland on July 8, 1872. She was greeted by a stranger who said "Here's Polly," as he helped her from the saddle and ever after Polly has been her name.² She stayed in the camp for many years and operated a boarding house there. She could neither read nor write but had a good understanding of the mountains and the mountain folk.³

Many stories are told of Polly's life in the old mining camp, and the one most often told is that Polly became the wife of Bemis on the turn of a card, but when on her first visit to Grangeville in August 1923, Polly told of a card game and of a shooting that led to her marriage to Bemis.⁴

This most popular version, filled with the romance of the old wild west thriller, is that Charles Bemis, of New England, who came west to mine and became a gambler in Warren about 1870. During this time, Polly worked in a saloon owned by her Chinese master, Hong King. One evening Bemis began to play poker in a friendly way with this very prominent Chinese of Warrens. The two had played often together, but that night Bemis "had the luck." Hong King had lost everything he owned but one possession --- the Chinese slave girl.

With all eyes focused on them, neither man would back down, and when when the Chinese offered his last and most cherished possession---the slave girl---against the table stakes, Bemis was equal to the occasion, and not only put up the money in sight but went to the safe

1. Ruthanne Lum McCunn, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1981, pp.21-27.

2. *Ibid.*, p.48.

3. *Idaho Country Free Press Grangeville newspapers, September 25, 1919.*

4. *Idaho Country Free Press Grangeville Newspapers, September 25, 1919.*

of the gambling house, withdrew all the money he had in gold dust and threw this into the pot.

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The cards were dealt and the play began. It was a very dramatic moment and all the house gathered to watch the final play. Bemis won the girl and the money, but he did not marry the Chinese girl.

The other version is that Bemis was shot in the face in September 1890, by a half-breed Indian during a brawl over the loss of \$250. Bemis had own the money, but the breed demanded the cash or he would "shoot his eye out." Bemis failed to pay and the breed shot. The bullet missed the eye but shattered his cheek. Polly came to the rescue and after weeks of faithful care nursed him back to health. They were maarrried in 1894 and moved to a humble cabin on Salmon River.⁶

Here, apart from the world, in the loneliness of the deep mountain chasm, the white man and his Chinese wife dwelt in happiness and contentment, undisturbed except by an occassional prospector who passed their way, or a boatload of adventures with Capt, Grleke who would shoot down the "River of No Return" and always stop at the Bemis ranch.⁷

The Bemis ranch, consisting of three or four acres of very fertile soil, lay along the trail of the early day miners from warrens to Lewiston. They raised their own food and bought only a few necessities they could not raise. Produce form their garden --- "Polly's Garden"⁸ --- was taken into Warrens ten miles away and sold or traded for their necessities, which were packed out to the farm by pack animals.

Polly raised wheat, graound it into flour and made her own bread. Her garden was a paradise of flowers and shubs, many of them from China.⁹ She had some chickens, ducks and a cow. Shee became an adept fisherwoman.¹⁰ Sporttsmen, travellers and anyone who passed through that

5. *R.G. Balley, River of No Return. Lewiston, Idaho: Balley-Blake Printing Company, 1935, pp.477-478.*

6. *Oregonian, November 4, 1933 Idaho Country Free Press Grangeville Newspaper, January 22, 1925.*

7. *Ibid, May 12, 1932.*

8. *Fren Coble Trull, History of the Chinese in Idaho from 1832 to 1910, A Thesls of the University of Oregon, June, 1946, p.103. R.G. Balley, River of No Return, p.478.*

9. *Elsensohn Siser M. Alfree, Idaho Country's Most Romantic Character: Polly Bemis, Idaho Corportion of Benedictns Sisters, 1979, p. 18.*

10. *Idaho Country Free Press Grangeville Newspaper, October 19, 1922.*

country was made welcome at the Bemis home. No money was ever taken for board and lodging, although the Bemis ranch really substituted for a hotel in that region, so travellers were always trying to get gifts for Polly. When the guest left he was loaded with all the fruits and vegetables he could carry, and his last memory would be of Charlie and Polly Bemis standing on the trail waving good-bye.

Polly always went hunting with her husband in the old days, for she could see game when he couldn't and used to run up and down and whisk around the hills like a squittel in a pine tree.¹¹

Bemis died in 1922 and Polly "at the age of seventy was left alone with her pipe and reminiscences of a long life into which has been crowded more lurid in their most vivid dreams."¹²

Polly lived alone for eleven years. One newspaper man asked Polly, "You'd better get another husband", to see how she'd take it. "Hee! Hee!" she laughed, coy and amused "Yes, I tink (think) so, too."¹³

Polly was a tiny woman, with iron gray hair, the brightest of eyes and wore a blue cotton dress, her whole appearance scrupulously neat. She speech was excellent, with just enough of the pidgin English to make it fascinating. Her memory was remarkable and her eyes twinkle as she told jokes on herself.¹⁴

She spoke of the miners not liking the coffee she made in camp, and the way she silenced them by appearing with a butcher knife and the question, "who no likee (like) my coffee?"¹⁵

One of Polly's most cherished possessions was a blue silk dress fashioned about 35 years ago, with rows of buttons made by her husband from \$2.50 and \$5 gold pieces. The silk was sent into the camp from San Francisco and was lined with flour sacks from Grangeville. It burned in a fire, but Polly saved the buttons.

11. *Idaho Country Free Press Grangeville Newspaper*, July 21, 1921.

12. *Bailey, River of No Return*, p.478.

13. *Idaho Country Free Press Grangeville Newspaper*, July 21, 1921.

14. *Ibid.*, January 22, 1925.

15. Elsensohn Sister M. Alfreda, *Idaho Chinese Lore*, Idaho Corporation of Benedictine Sister, 19279, p.82.
Elsensohn Sister M. Alfreda, *Idaho Country's Most Romantic Character: Polly Bemis*, pp.19-20.

Asked what she thought of the "flapper" of today with her rouge and paint, she said:

"I paint like that, too, all the time, till I go to my man. Then I (do) not have to paint any more. American girl today paint till she gets man, too."¹⁶

She shakes her head at shorn locks but approves of modern dress.

Polly Bemis made two trips to the outside world after an isolation in the backwoods of Idaho county for almost fifty-one years. In August, 1923, she came out to Grangeville for dental work, and it was here she saw her first train, a motion picture show and an automobile. The movie was the most fascinating thing to her of all the wonders the outside world had to offer. She was taken to the wonders the outside world had to offer. She was taken to the railroad station to witness the arrival of the evening train, and when the trainmen had been advised that she had never seen one before, they lifted her into the cab, opened the firebox and allowed her to peer at the roaring, seething furnace. But she was frightened, very much frightened, at the steaming black monster of the rails.¹⁷

In 1924, Polly, again visited Grangeville and also made a trip to Boise, more dental work being needed. At Boise she was privileged to visit with a few of her native countrymen, the first she had seen in thirty-five years.

"I have best time in fifty year," cried Polly. Chinese woman of Warren, as she boarded the Salmon River stage bound for her home in the old mining camp.¹⁸

During her week's stay she was feted by many pioneer residents of Idaho county, who knew her in the early mining days at Warren.

Bedecked in a new dress, a gay hat and white shoes, and with new clothing, all gifts of friends, Polly was as happy as a child after the annual visit of Santa Claus. She was particularly proud of the new gold-rimmed spectacles with which she fitted while in Grangeville.

16. *Idaho Country Free Press Grangeville Newspaper*, August 7, 1924.

17. *Ibid.*, August 23, 1923.

18. *Ibid.*, November 12, 1924.

When a newspaper man asked Polly to pose for a photograph before she left. She is not disturbed by the sight of a camera since many of the travelers with Capt. Guleke who stop at the ranch frequently take pictures of her.¹⁹

As Polly grew older and her ready funds grew low, She made arrangements with two prospectors across the Salmon River, Charles Shep and Peter Kleinkenheimer, to provide her with the necessities of life. In return, she deeded her little place to them. In 1933, Polly became very ill and her friends had her taken to the Grangeville hospital for care. She lived for three months and was buried in Grangeville.

With the passing of Lalu Mathoy, we write finis to the story of a truly brave and loveable character, kind to man, bird or beast, and a friend to all unfortunates who came her way. She was loyal to her husband and they seemed very fond of one another. Her life had not always been pleasant, but death found her smiling, peaceful and happy. "Life has been sweet to me", she said.²⁰

More often than not, when people think of Chinese in America they imagine railroad laborers, hand laundrymen, or maybe the neighborhood restaurant with the neon signs. We seldom hear about women. Since the first known Chinese woman appeared in Idaho, Polly Bemis has become the major research subject of historians in America. From the studies of Polly Bemis, We know the traditional Chinese women's characteristics. Let us trace back to nineteenth century Chinese society, governed by Confucian ideology, stressed feudal loyalty and filial piety according to the following principle of social order: Should the ruler and the ruled, the superior and the inferior, male and female all know their places and act accordingly, then all would be in harmony. Just as the gentry was destined to rule and the common people were destined to be ruled, Therefore, when forced to sell her --- the price was two bags of soybeans --- although her father called her his treasure, his "thousand pieces of gold."²¹ In nineteenth century Chinese women were destined to occupy a subordinate position to men in the Confucian social order.

Following the Confucian precept of the "Three Obediences," a Chinese woman was expected to obey her father at home, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son when widowed. The

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, November 9, 1933.

21. McCunn, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, p.72

"Four Virtues" required of her were chastity and obedience, reticence, pleasing manner, and domestic skills. Even a woman with a superior mind had to suppress her better judgement and personal aspirations and play the prescribed docile, servile role. From Polly Bemis' characters we can prove this precept. Polly was loyal and obedient to her husband. She had loveable character and domestic skills. For example, after that Polly ran a boarding house at Charles Place, she was an excellent worker. And she had a marvelous sense of humor. At the boarding house she overheard some men complaining about her coffee. She came running out from behind the stove waving a cleaver and said, "Who no likee (like) my coffee?" In addition, Polly had been taught the art of goldsmithing in China and she used to beg nuggets from her friends, especially those who came to her boarding place. Another favorite occupation for Polly was crocheting. She liked to crochet flowers, cats, birds, geese, and butterflies. There are eight pieces of such work in the Museum at St. Gertrudes.²²

Because education was the only means by which those born in the lower classes could hope to rise above their circumstances, the common people strove to educate their sons. Polly Bemis is a typical example. Rarely did families bother to do so for daughters. Rather, a girl's "lack of talent" was considered a virtue.²³ If she were educated, it was so that she would be better able to teach her sons and care for her family. At best, a girl from a family of means was privately tutored or placed in a private boarding school to be trained in proper deportment and the domestic arts of sewing and cooking.

A peasant who hoped to marry his daughter off to a family of better means could have her feet bound, since bound feet were considered a symbol of gentility. For example, Polly Bemis' feet were deformed indicating that they had been bandaged in early childhood. She wore a size thirteen shoe.²⁴

From this we may assume that for a time at least she had been of a higher class or caste than that of peasant class from which these girls were generally recruited.

Bound feet began in the tenth century when a Chinese prince became enamored with the small "lily feet" of his concubine. Until foot binding was outlawed at the end of the nineteenth cen-

22. Elsensohn Sister, *Idaho Country's Most Romantic Character: Polly Bemis*, p.18.

23. McCunn, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, p.25. Lucie Cheng and Suelle Cheng, *Chinese Historical Society of Southern California*, 1984, p.4.

24. Elsensohn Sister, *Idaho Women of America: A Pictorial History*, University of Washington Press, 1986, p. 14.

tury, countless girls suffered excruciating pain as their feet were tightly wrapped until the arches were broken and the toes permanently bent under. The ideal size of a bound foot was said to measure no more than three inches. Another example, Afong Moy, reportedly the first Chinese woman to come to America in 1834, was brought to New York by showmen as an exotic curio to satisfy the American public's curiosity in "things" Chinese. She showed "New York belles how different ladies look in widely separated regions," according to newspaper advertisements.²⁵ Afong Moy was followed by others, including Pwan Yekoo, who appeared in Barnum's Chinese Museum as "a genuine Chinese lady" which prepared to exhibit her charming self, her curious retinue, and her fairy feet (only two and a half inches long), to an admiring and novelty-loving public.²⁶

Bound feet, besides identifying women as being "of gentle birth," also served to prevent women from "wandering". Women with bound feet were generally unable to walk unassisted, and even going a short distance was often painful. As it was improper for a Chinese lady to be seen in public or to be in company of men, women's physical condition served to reinforce their cloistered existence.

The problems and realities Chinese women in America are facing tie together in a continuous thread. It doesn't matter whether Chinese women in America are recent immigrants or American born, whose legacy of ups and downs, bitter and sweet stretch back over a one hundred and fifty years to when the first Chinese woman Polly Bemis set foot on Idaho soil. It doesn't matter because each generation has pushed hard to affirm itself in the face of tremendous cultural obstacles, and despite often virulent racial discrimination. In this regard, the experience of Chinese woman is no different from the Chinese male counterparts who support the other "half of the sky." However, the one distinctive issue Chinese women in America today is how to actively change the traditional burden of Chinese women. Therefore, today's Chinese women not only need to confront the racism they encounter, but they must also challenge the men who work shoulder to shoulder with and redefine the roles imposed upon them by tradition.

For the traditional Chinese woman, we can figure out from Polly Bemis' character, the family comes first, the husband comes first, and the children come first (although Polly had no child).

25. Judy Yung, *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History*, University of Washington Press, 1986, p.

14.

26. *New York Times*, April 21, 1850.

The concept of "self" is non-existent.²⁷ Women only have worth when serving the family. Once separated, they no longer have an identity. Actually this concept is basically the same in traditional Chinese and Western cultures, but it has changed more in the West. In the United States, these traditional roles have questioned, rebelled against in the 1970s; alternative roles experimented with in the 70s; and slowly entered into a new, not yet clear phase in the 80s.²⁸ Women's issues have advanced beyond simply "getting out of the kitchen" to redefining all gender relations at home, at work, and in society-at-large. How do we fit in? Not too easily! Being Chinese in America and being women, we carry double identities and have to deal with extremely complex difficulties.

First of all, those immigrant women from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China tend to be more deeply affected by traditional expectations. Family is still the priority, but at the same time economic pressures leave them no choice but to seek outside paying jobs. Due to the long history of anti-Chinese discrimination, occupational choices are limited.²⁹ In addition, the language and cultural barriers force these women to seek work in garment factories, restaurants, and other low-paying and long hours menial jobs.³⁰ But, after these women go home after a tiring day at work, they cannot rest like their husbands. Many still need to take care of the house and the children. How do they have time to learn English, let alone begin to unravel American culture? They have to struggle just to survive. They nurture the family and depend on it heavily. Those who are not content with this traditional role are often not understood by their husbands or families. Family disputes and broken marriages can result.

In contrast, women who grow up or are born in the United States cannot but help be heavily affected by Western culture. Their ease with English, fashion sense, and behavior are generally very different from their immigrant mothers. This distance leads to mis-communication. This is more than a generational gap, it is a cultural chasm.

These women carry less of the weight of dead tradition and can move more easily in circles outside of the immigrant Chinatown ghetto.³¹

27. Ch'u Chai, "Chinese Humanism: A Study of Chinese Mentality and Temperament", *Social Research*, Vol 26, No.1, 1985, pp.31-33.
28. *Los Angeles Star*, October 22, 1985.
29. Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991. p.134.
30. Luther W. Spoehr, "Sambo and the Heathen Chinese: Californias' Racial Stereotypes in the Late 1870s", *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 42, 1973, pp.185-189.
31. Cahin B.T. Lee, *Chinatown, U.S.A.* New York: Doubleday & Co., Garden City, 1976, p.72

But they have to contend with other problems. In the larger world, they become keenly sensitive to racism and changing gender relations. Coming to terms with these daily matters become urgent and integral to affirming their identities. As women and as individuals they need to constantly sort out these issues and make choices. And in this process they instinctively search for a supportive culture. But they are caught in a dilemma. They cannot hold onto the traditional culture like immigrant women, nor can they swallow the white American mainstream culture whole.³²

As women of the 1990s, it does not matter whether we are young or old, immigrant or American born, educated or illiterate, asking different questions or facing different problems. What matters is that we break through these differences and begin understanding each other. In this way, our diverse backgrounds and generational perspectives will serve as a basis for selfaffirmation and further nurture a vital and sustaining Chinese American culture. The history of the first pioneer woman arriving in Idaho to the women of today who proudly hold up "half the sky," this entire history can serve as a mirror for us to reflect upon. If we can steadily gather together more of this quiltwork history and combine it with our creative expression, then our culture can support more and more diverse women, and men; in our individual and collective efforts to improve ourselves.

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