



Name in English: Polly Bemis
Name in Chinese: Unknown
Name in Pinyin: Unknown
Gender: Female
Birth Year: 1853-1933
Birth Place: Beijing, China

Profession (s): Pioneer, Farmer

Education: No known education

Contribution (s): Polly Bemis is a figure that is shrouded in myth and legend. The facts about her early life are disputed and nobody is even sure what her Chinese name was. She was born around Beijing in 1853. Social historians have noted that she must have come from a wealthy or aspiring family as her feet were bound. Foot binding involved deliberately breaking the feet of daughters and binding them to make them tiny and therefore more attractive according to the social customs of the time. Working class Chinese and non-Han Chinese didn't follow this practice as it crippled women and rendered them unable to walk or stand for long and therefore unable to do hard labor in the farm fields. According to Polly she was sold by her family for bags of seed grain.

She was brought over to the United States in 1872 and illegally sold for what she said was \$2,500. Although many Chinese women were illegally brought over to the United States and sold into prostitution it seems unlikely that Polly was sold as such. Translated into 2013 dollars that \$2,500 in 1872 would now be around \$640,000, far beyond normal prices. It seems far more likely that a wealthy Chinese man bought her to become his concubine or second wife in America, possibly because her feet were bound. At a time that polygamy was the mark of a successful man in China a wealthy Chinese man in America would usually leave his primary wife at home caring for his parents and children while having a concubine in America. In Chinese society she would have had the same rights if not the same prestige as a wife.

She was brought from San Francisco to Portland, Oregon, and from there to the town of Warren in Idaho Territory. From 1862 to 1875 gold mined from the nearby Warren Creek made it a boomtown. A 1923 interview described how she arrived in Warren, "by saddle horse from Portland on July 8, 1872. As she alighted from her horse, she was greeted by a stranger who said, 'Here's Polly,' as he helped her from the saddle and ever after Polly [w]as... her name."

Polly probably suffered at first from the handicap of having come from Northern China and speaking only Mandarin at a time when almost all Chinese immigrants in America came from Southern China and either spoke the Taishan dialect or Cantonese. Although

highly intelligent and soon able to speak both English and Cantonese she remained illiterate in both languages because she had to earn a living instead of going to school.

She first appeared officially in the 1880 US Census listed as "Polly" with no last name, a twenty-seven year old widow living with Charles (Charlie) Bemis, a single saloon owner, aged thirty-two. A legendary tale, recounted by many people but not supported by any contemporary evidence, says that Charlie won Polly in a poker game from a Chinese man but Polly always emphatically denied the poker story. It seems far more likely that her Chinese patron simply died or less likely went back to China leaving her behind.

Racist violence and prejudice against the Chinese was increasing exponentially as economic conditions deteriorated across the United States during the "Long Depression" which lasted from 1873 to 1885. It was not safe to be a Chinese in America and especially dangerous to be a Chinese woman. Women were rare on the frontier, especially Chinese women. In an 1881 local newspaper article, Polly was mentioned as one of only four women in Warren out of its two thousand inhabitants. Polly really needed a protector like Charlie against unscrupulous white and Chinese men.

In 1890, Charlie Bemis was shot in the face by someone demanding the payment of a debt that Charlie didn't feel he owed. A doctor removed part of the bullet but was unable to remove the rest. It was feared that Charlie would die from blood poisoning but Polly managed to nurse him back to health over several weeks. By 1893, the miners had left and the population of Warren had dwindled to just 176 people, 100 of them Caucasians, 75 Chinese men, and of course 1 Chinese woman. No more saloons or gambling houses existed anymore and Charlie now owned a boarding house that Polly managed. All of 4 1/2 feet tall she developed a formidable but beloved reputation. In a 1924 interview she described how she silenced patrons complaining about her coffee making skills by brandishing a butcher knife and asking, "Who no like my coffee?"

In 1894 she married Charlie Bemis at the age of 40, a marriage that some people said was a convenience to avoid Polly being deported back to China under the Chinese exclusion laws passed by Congress. Interracial marriages and cohabitation between whites and non-whites had been banned in Idaho from 1864 to 1887. But from 1887 to 1921 only marriages between whites and African Americans were banned. It was only in 1921 that the racial laws extended the ban to Asians. Miscegenation laws would only be repealed in Idaho in 1959. In 1895, because of a severe blizzard preventing travel, Polly and other Chinese in Warren failed to register with the federal government for a certificate of residence as required by anti-Chinese laws and a case was brought against her in the US District Court of Idaho threatening deportation. When white witnesses testified to the blizzard (since Chinese weren't allowed to testify) the case was dismissed.

Soon after their marriage the couple moved seventeen miles to a remote mining claim along the Salmon River that even today can only be reached by boat where they raised chickens for eggs, grew fruits and vegetables, and traded the surplus in town. Polly supplemented their supplies with fishing which she loved to catch using the worms she put in her pockets each day from her gardening. The couple became known for their generosity in sharing what they had with their neighbors and with tourists coming down

in boats along the river. Their cabin became a center where neighbors and visitors gathered from many miles around to dance and talk the nights away. Polly was especially noted for her love of and kindness towards children, always remembering their birthdays and other events with her remarkable memory and for the many pets she kept. Among those pets was a cougar that famously ate from a metal plate nailed to the dining table. In 1921, a writer visited their cabin and under the byline of Countess Eleanor Gizycka wrote about her interview with Polly in a 1923 issue of *Field and Stream* magazine. This brought Polly's story to national attention and even more visitors. Showing her impish sense of humor, the now elderly Polly said, "I cost \$2,500. Don't look at it now, hmm?"

The couple didn't have long to enjoy their time in the spotlight. By 1923, Charlie had been confined to his bed for two years and was being cared for by sixty-nine year old Polly. That year a fire broke out and destroyed the cabin. Charlie was barely rescued by Polly and Charlie Sheep, a neighboring rancher. Already frail and now suffering from smoke inhalation, Charlie passed away two months later. His grave on a neighbors property was placed on a hillside across the river from the log cabin in accordance with feng shui (Chinese geomancy) principles. Polly moved back to Warren and lived there for almost two years. During that time several interviews were done with her and she became even more of a celebrity. She was viewed as a relic of the heroic pioneer age in Idaho history. Her reaction during visits to Grangeville in 1923 and Boise in 1924, taking her first car ride, seeing her first train and streetcar, attending her first motion picture, and even taking an elevator were noted in the newspapers. Many white people sent her gifts in admiration and lingering hostilities towards the Chinese waned.

Her white rancher neighbors, Charlie Shepp and Pete Klinkhammer, so loved and respected Polly that they built her a new log cabin where the old one had stood. She moved back to the remote location by mid-October 1924 where she continued to work and support herself and entertain visitors. Charlie Shepp found her collapsed outside of her cabin on August 4, 1933 suffering from an apparent stroke. Polly Bemis passed away on November 6, 1933, aged just over 80 and was buried in Grangeville Cemetery.

In 1981, the life of Polly Bemis was told in the bestselling book, "Thousand Pieces of Gold" by Ruthanne Lum McCunn. Polly was exhumed in 1987 and reburied next to the restored log cabin, much to the distress of romantics that felt Charlie and Polly should have been reunited. At the dedication ceremonies for the new museum, Idaho Governor Cecil Andrus stated, "The history of Polly Bemis is a great part of the legacy of central Idaho. She is the foremost pioneer on the rugged Salmon River." The cabin was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. In 1991, a popular film was made loosely based upon her biography with Rosalind Chao portraying Polly Bemis.

External Links:

Riley, Glenda; Richard Etulain, *Wild Women of the Old West*, Fulcrum Publishing. pp. 57–61, (2003)
ISBN 1-55591-295-8

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/feature/asia/2000/feature00.htm#Bemis>

<http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/chinese/16.html>

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1352&context=clweb>

<http://www.mccunn.com/PollyBemis.html>