



DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary of
Hattie Campbell*



Across the Wide and Lonesome Prairie

KRISTIANA GREGORY

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While the events described and some of the characters in this book
may be based on actual historical events and real people,
Hattie Campbell is a fictional character, created by the author,
and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.

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Booneville, Missoura



1847

Booneville, Missouri

January 15, 1847, Friday

Sleet and rain.

Ma said that because today is my birthday I may have two slices of chocolate cake. So I did! After supper she gave me a blue satin ribbon for my braid, then when Pa went to bed she let me unwrap another gift. It was a camisole with a matching lace petticoat. Since I'm now thirteen years of age, Ma said it's proper for me to have pretty underthings.

Aunt June agreed, then she gave me this journal. She said every young lady must have a place to record her private thoughts. I will try to do so.

January 20, 1847, Wednesday

Still raining. Our roof is leaking upstairs over the hallway and in my room by the foot of my bed. I've moved the pot there to catch the drips.

I hide this diary under my pillow, but take it out often to look at. I love the smell of its coarse

paper and have decided to use my new hair ribbon as a bookmark. The blue looks pretty lying across the page.

February 2, 1847, Tuesday

Three nights ago my poor uncle Milton fell off our roof while he was helping Pa fix a leak. He died right there in the barnyard, there was nothing we could do.

His funeral was today, one of the most interesting days in a very long time. It all started when his coffin fell out the side of our hay wagon and slid down the bank into the river.

Ma held the horses while Pa went after the coffin through the mud and weeds. I hurried after Pa, but my skirt caught in the brush. He grabbed the coffin and had his arms around it to haul it up, but just then a St. Louis steamboat rounded the bend with its big paddles churning up the water and making waves higher than Pa's head. He held on tight, but all of a sudden he floated out

into those waves like a cork, me and Ma screaming for help.

Some folks on the top deck yelled until the captain pulled the whistle long and loud. Pa was being sucked into those tall white paddles when someone threw him a rope and pulled him aboard just in time.

We watched the coffin go under. Some moments later it popped free, its lid gone and Uncle Milton, too. Where he went, we don't know, but this is how we came to be acquainted with the riverboat captain who felt so sorry for us that he said he'd take us anywhere we pleased, no charge.

"Anywheres?" Pa asked, as he stomped the water out of his boots.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Anywhere."

This very evening Pa made a shocking announcement: He said that because of the captain's kindness we can now afford to take a riverboat up to Independence, where the Oregon Trail begins. We will take on board our old wagon

and our belongings. We will buy some mules in that town, then we will head West.

Just like that.

Ma's mouth dropped open, but no words came out. She was so mad I suspect the next funeral will be my pa's.

February 3, 1847, Wednesday

Wind blowing through this creaky old house kept me awake most of the night, so here I am in my shawl, looking out the little window by my bed, trying to stay warm. Since my room is in the attic it stays cold until Ma opens the stair door. My fingers are numb, so I will write quick.

I can hear Ma downstairs frying up bacon and putting coffee on. She did not speak to Pa the rest of yesterday, nor has she this morning, for all I hear is silence after Pa's questions.

When Ma gets mad, she stays mad a long time.



February 5, 1847, Friday

Three days have gone by with Ma only speaking to me, my little brothers, and Aunt June. Finally at supper tonight she looked at Pa and said, "Charles Campbell, Oregon is two thousand miles away."

Pa nodded. He seemed so relieved to have Ma talking again. She said, "Tell me why, Charles, and I will tell you yes or no."

My, it was a long evening. I took up the plates and set to washing them with Jake. He is six and likes to splash the water, but still he is a help. Bennie's two so he stayed on Ma's knee while she listened to Pa.

Pa said he'd been unhappy about so many people settling here in Missoura. It's crowded. Taxes are high. And there's swamp fever that kills folks every summer.

At the mention of swamp fever Pa grew quiet. He swallowed hard, then looked at Ma with tears in his eyes. In a soft voice he said her name: "Augusta," he said, "we'll be able to start a new life, where there ain't no sad memories. There's

space out West, all the land we want. Free for the taking. Winters are mild, that's what these pamphlets say."

He held up a booklet called *The Emigrants' Guide, to Oregon and California* by Lansford W. Hastings, and another by the explorers John C. Frémont and Kit Carson.

I took my candle upstairs. I'm not sure if Ma said yes or no, but I'm happy to once again hear them whispering together in their room.

February 7, 1847, Sunday

We have given up hope of finding Uncle Milton's body. So today in church folks took turns walking up to the pulpit to say a few kind words. My friend Becky, she's exactly my age, she sang a hymn so sweet all the ladies dabbed hankies to their cheeks.

Afterward my aunt June and uncle Tim came in a freezing rain and we sat together in front of the fire. I served up coffee and two peach pies made from last summer's preserves. My, it was delicious. When they said they wanted to come to

Oregon, too, well, Mama smiled for the first time in days for Aunt June is her dear younger sister. (It was their brother, Milton, that died.)

February 9, 1847, Tuesday

Word spreads fast in a small town. Everyone's talking about Oregon and California.

Becky says she would positively perish from loneliness if I left Booneville, which is where we were born and have lived our whole lives. "Please don't go, Hattie," she said. "If you leave Missoura, we may never see each other again." I feel sad when Becky talks so.

It's pretty much divided down the middle who thinks which is the best place to go to.

Pa said that since California is like a foreign country and we don't speak Spanish we best head for Oregon. It's occupied by the British, but at least those folks speak English.

Our new president is James Polk. Pa says the only reason he won the election is because he promised to make Oregon and California

territories of the United States. So if enough of us get up and go, it'll help push the foreigners aside for good.

It's our "Manifest Destiny," according to President Polk. It's our responsibility to spread democracy all the way to the Pacific coast.

Ma was at her mending this morning, in the window seat where the light is good. I sat on the little stool with the embroidered cushion. When I looked up, I saw she was crying.

"What is it, Mama?"

She lifted the hem of her apron to dry her cheeks. "Hattie, I don't care about 'Manifest Destiny.' The West is wilderness. It'll be a frightfully long journey with no turning back. All our dear friends live in Booneville, and besides, I don't think I can bear to leave behind your sisters."

I lay my face on Ma's lap. She was talking about my four sweet sisters, three older, one younger. Last summer—the most horrible summer of our lives—they died one right after the other, from swamp fever, and they are buried next to my grandparents under the big walnut tree out back.

I am now the eldest of the Campbell children.
I am thirteen years of age and am afraid of only
four things in the whole world.

1. Indians
2. copperhead snakes
3. a toothache
4. losing my little brothers, Ben and Jake,
they're all I got now