

= Eilley Bowers =

Alison " Eilley " Oram Bowers ( September 6 , 1826 ? October 27 , 1903 ) was a Scottish American woman who was , in her time , one of the richest women in the United States , and owner of the Bowers Mansion , one of the largest houses in the western United States . A farmer 's daughter , Bowers married as a teenager , and her husband converted to Mormonism before the couple immigrated to the United States . After briefly living in Nauvoo , Illinois , she became an early Nevada pioneer , farmer and miner , and was made a millionaire by the Comstock Lode mining boom . Married and divorced two times , she married a third time and became a mother of three children but outlived them all .

Following the deaths of her first 2 children in infancy then her husband , with the third child dying a few short years after , and with the collapse of the Nevada mining economy , Eilley Bowers became bankrupt and destitute . Eilley reinvented herself as " The Famous Washoe Seeress " , a professional scryer and fortune @-@ teller in Nevada and California . Worth over \$ 4 million at the height of the Nevada mining boom , she died penniless in a care home in Oakland , California .

= = Early life = =

Alison Oram ( sometimes spelled " Orrum " ) , commonly called Eilley , was born on September 6 , 1826 , in Forfar , Scotland . Her only brother John was born in 1821 , and it appears that her father 's work forced them to move frequently . John was born in Dunfermline and at some point during their childhood , they moved eighty miles southwest of Forfar to Clackmannan . It was here that she married Stephen Hunter in the Church of Scotland at the age of fifteen . Stephen soon met some Mormon missionaries and became a believer . He was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and agreed to immigrate to America . Eilley never converted but traveled with her husband . They sailed for America on January 29 , 1849 . By the time the Hunters reached Salt Lake City , the strain on their marriage was evident . After eight years of marriage , Bowers and Stephen separated in early 1850 .

= = Remarriage and settlement in Nevada = =

In 1853 , Bowers married farmer Alexander Cowan . Two years later the couple joined a mission to Mormon Station , near the western edge of Utah Territory . They brought with them Alexander 's 12 @-@ year @-@ old nephew who had recently been orphaned by the death of Alexander 's sister . The following year , the mission relocated to Washoe Valley in a settlement they named Franktown . The Cowans purchased 320 acres ( 130 ha ) of land for \$ 100 ( approximately \$ 2500 today ) . The existing ranch contained a dwelling house and coral . They stayed for two seasons .

During the crisis of the Utah War in 1857 , Brigham Young recalled Mormon colonists from the western areas of the proposed State of Deseret to the core area of Mormon settlement south of the Great Salt Lake . Alexander heeded the call , leaving his wife and son in Western Utah . With Alexander gone , Bowers and Robert left the abandoned settlement of Franktown for a small mining camp called Johntown in Gold Canyon near present @-@ day Virginia City , Nevada . Bowers opened a boardinghouse and began taking care of the miners . When the threat of war passed , Alexander returned to Western Utah and settled in Johntown , but he did not wish to pursue the life of a Washoe miner . In the fall of 1858 he returned to Salt Lake City where he remained a prominent member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter @-@ day Saints . Bowers and Robert remained in Johntown .

= = = Gold Hill and the Comstock Lode = = =

As prospectors began entering the area in large numbers , they soon settled in a new town they named Gold Hill . Bowers opened a new boardinghouse , but she was also buying and selling mining claims . At this time she was also known to engage in fortune @-@ telling using a traditional

Scottish " peep stone " she had brought from Forfar . Henry de Groot recorded that on his arrival in August 1859 :

Mrs Ellen Cowan was living at Gold Hill in a very rude and comfortless sort of abode . She did the washing for the miners , a business that paid well at that day , and had gathered not a little gear prior to her marriage with Sandy .

Lemuel Sanford ( Sandy ) Bowers was one of the town ' s new arrivals . Sandy was a Missouri muleskinner ( teamster ) , born in Madison County , Illinois on February 24 , 1833 . Sandy owned many mining claims , but his most productive was a ten @-@ foot strip being part of the Little Gold Hill Mines . James Rogers owned the adjoining ten @-@ foot strip which he sold to Bowers for \$ 100 .

On August 9 , 1859 , Eilley and Sandy joined their mining claims and lives when they were married in Gold Hill . In order to settle the land in Washoe Valley , Bowers officially divorced Alexander Cowan on June 4 , 1860 . As a settlement , she received half of the 320 @-@ acre farm they had owned in the Washoe Valley .

As the area boomed following the discovery of the Comstock Lode , the Bowers claim proved to hold one of the richest seams of silver ore in what would become Nevada , and because their claim was close to the surface , it was easily extracted without initial capital investment . The Bowers Mining Company quickly made Eilley and Sandy very wealthy .

= = = European tour and the Bowers Mansion = = =

On June 28 , 1860 Eilley Bowers gave birth to a son , John Jasper Bowers , who died on August 27 , 1860 . On June 16 , 1861 she gave birth to a daughter , Theresa Fortunatas Bowers , who died on September 17 , 1861 . With money to be had , the couple began to plan a grand mansion on the old Cowan Ranch in Washoe Valley . While the house was being built , the couple traveled through Europe to explore the old county and purchase furniture for the new house .

Shortly before their departure , the couple hosted a banquet at the International Hotel in Virginia City , to which the entire town was invited , and which included free champagne . After traveling to California , the Bowers sailed from San Francisco for England on May 2 , 1862 , aboard the steamer Golden Gate . The couple visited Eilley ' s family in Scotland and traveled through Europe while purchasing large quantities of furniture .

The couple returned to Nevada in March 1863 , accompanied by a baby girl , named Margaret Persia Bowers . The Bowers never divulged where they had acquired the child . Some contemporary sources claimed she was born on their European crossing to an unwed mother who died during childbirth .

The Bowers Mansion was one of the most expensive buildings built in the western United States at the time . Designed by J. Neely Johnson , the former Governor of California , The two @-@ story dressed granite stone mansion consisted of 16 rooms constructed with Jeffery Pine and Douglas fir . The main floor included a library , guest room , reception room , formal parlor and adjoining smoking room , dining room , and kitchen . Four hand @-@ crafted carrara marble fireplaces warmed the downstairs room . A plaster of Paris frieze border decorated the ceilings , moldings and medallions above the chandeliers . The main entrance hall opened to a turned mahogany handrail and balcony , which led to the upstairs where Eilley , Sandy , and Persia each had a suite of rooms including a bedroom and sitting room . Expensive toys and fancy dolls filled Persia ' s playroom . The extra upstairs room housed a hand @-@ sculptured billiard table used for the enjoyment and entertainment of their guests . Kerosene lanterns and candles lighted the beautiful mansion that was truly unlike any other in the West .

= = Economic hardship = =

The rich silver of the Comstock Lode began to play out in 1863 resulting in a deepening depression throughout 1864 . Sandy moved back to Gold Hill to help save the mine . With health failing , he attempted to sell or lease most of the Bowers mining operation in the spring of 1868 . At the age of

35 , Sandy died of Lung Disease on April 21 , 1868 at his Gold Hill residence . He was buried on the hill behind his Mansion .

In 1873 , Virginia City recovered with a new strike bringing wealth back to the region . Eilley Bowers opened the Bowers Mansion to the public as a resort . The grounds were advertised as being beneficial to health , while dances and social events were held in the mansion . Bowers improved the mansion and grounds by adding a dance hall and offering the upstairs suits for family use . With the extension of the railroad which now connected Virginia City to the young town of Reno and the Trans Continental Railroad , Bowers Mansion became a prime destination for grand excursions . Eilley spent many weekends hosting extravagant picnics . The guests bathed in the fishponds , swung under the trees , waltzed on the dance floor and generally just had a fine old time . For the next few years , Bowers Mansion was filled with music and laughter .

Meanwhile , Persia Bowers was sent to live with friends in Reno allowing her to go to school and learn music . On July 14 , 1874 Persia died of what may have been a ruptured appendix . She was buried behind the mansion with her father .

The resort brought in some money , but Bowers was still in debt . The Bowers Mine was sold to pay off creditors , and she entered into negotiations with the newly created State of Nevada for the state to purchase the mansion as a psychiatric hospital . Unfortunately for Bowers , the deal fell through , and she was obliged to begin to sell her possessions to settle debts .

Bowers made one final attempt to save the mansion when she hired construction crews and began renovating the mansion . This time she changed the entire structure by adding a third floor . The \$ 8 @, @ 000 expansion included 14 rooms including 10 over the main house and two over each wing . However , this only increased her debt .

In April 1876 , the District Court of Washoe County finally ruled against Bowers and in favor of her creditors in the sum of \$ 13,622.17. Nevada State Journal April 9 , 1876 ( 3 : 2 ) On May 3 , 1876 , at 1 : 00 p.m. the courts auctioned off the remaindered of her properties in front of the Washoe county Courthouse . Eight years after Sandy 's death , Eilley lost everything to the founder of Reno , Myron C. Lake for \$ 10 @, @ 000 .

= = = Seeres of Washoe = = =

Bankrupt and with no remaining family in the United States , Bowers set herself up as a fortune @-@ teller using her peep stone , billing herself as " Mrs L. S. Bowers , The Famous Washoe Seeress " . She enjoyed some success with her predictions , successfully predicting , among other things , the fire which destroyed much of Virginia City in 1875 . Due to the continued economic decline in northern Nevada following the collapse of the mining industry , in the 1880s she moved to San Francisco , where she continued to practice as a scryer .

= = = Destitution = = =

In the late 19th century , Bowers returned to Nevada . Her hearing had diminished significantly , and she was forced to give up the scrying business as she was unable to hear the requests of her clients . She launched a claim against the government asking for financial assistance in return for the \$ 14 @, @ 000 she and Sandy Bowers had donated to support the Union cause in the Civil War and to finance the 1860 Paiute War , but was ignored . Destitute , she was placed in the Washoe County poorhouse , and became the subject of a protracted legal dispute between the governments of Nevada and California over who was to pay for her care . In August 1901 it was agreed that California would take responsibility for her welfare , and she was summarily put on a San Francisco @-@ bound train by Reno officials with \$ 30 cash . For the last two years of her life she lived at the King 's Daughters Home in Oakland , dying on October 27 , 1903 . Her ashes were returned to Nevada and buried alongside Sandy and Margaret at the Bowers Mansion .

= = Legacy = =

Elley Bowers continues to be one of the most famous of 19th @-@ century female pioneers , and a major figure in the early history of Nevada . In one writer 's words , she " is one of the most researched , written and talked about women in Nevada history . "

Following its sale at auction following foreclosure , the Bowers Mansion was abandoned . Eventually purchased by Reno saloon owner Henry Riter , it was renovated and reopened as a resort in 1903 . The hot springs were remodeled to feed warm swimming pools , and a spur was built from the Virginia and Truckee Railroad to serve the property . It continued to operate as a resort until 1946 . It is now considered the finest example of the mansion houses built by the millionaire beneficiaries of the Comstock boom , is listed on the National Register of Historic Places , and is administered by the Washoe County Parks Department .