



Photo from: *The Baron, The Logger, The Miner and Me*, by John H Toole

## *Anna Lester O'Keefe (1834-1900)*

*A descendant of Scottish royalty. She married an infamous Missoula baron only to be shocked by her new "palace."*

- **1834-Birth.** December 25, 1834 near Cashel, Tipperary County, Ireland to Richard Lester. (Her mother's name has not been located.) Her family called her Annie. Anna was of English and Scottish descent. She was a descendant of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots.
- **1864-Marriage.** In 1864 she married the Baron Cornelius O'Keefe. They had two daughters, Mary (Mollie) and Margaret (Maggie).
- **1844.** At age eleven, she traveled by ship with her parents to America. On the trip her mother died from cholera after she took

"a horrible black medicine." Her mother was buried at sea. Anna and her father landed in Ontario Canada then later moved

to Iowa.

- **1863.** Anna and a group of friends traveled by oxen train to Montana. They arrived in Virginia City in Montana Territory after a three month arduous journey. She became a seamstress for a short time before being hired to teach school. She taught until she married in 1865.
- **1865.** Anna met and married Cornelius O'Keefe known as "Baron O'Keefe". Cornelius was delivering potatoes in Virginia City when they met. He charmed Anna with his dashing gallant handlebar mustache and self-proclaimed nobility (hence the name 'Baron'). He claimed to be a member of Irish nobility. They married after a whirlwind three day courtship. Cornelius told Annie if she would marry him he would provide her "a life of ease and plenty in a baronial palace back at (current day) O'Keefe's Creek in Missoula, Montana. After a whirlwind courtship of three days, they were married. She was quite surprised to find the palace was a one room cabin with a dirt floor and the "Baron" was an Irish peasant, but a man with a sense of humor and personal grandeur. It was a lonely time for Annie with very few other women in the area to visit. Life was hard. The Baron could be generous and kind but very cruel and frightful when he took to drinking.
- **Scrapbook.** It was very important to Anna that her daughters grow up with an awareness of a more cultured world. Anna kept a scrapbook full of feminine niceties, sentimental Victorian valentines, faded photographs, articles, and poems (many of which she wrote herself). The scrapbook showed the conflict between Anna's love for the refined life she had and her love for the wilderness she pioneered.
- **1883.** The Northern Pacific Railroad was completed, and the main line was only a small distance from the O'Keefe's Ranch. Anna was offered a lifetime pass on the railroad when she averted a bad train accident. While out walking with Maggie she noticed, a broken rail and removed tie. She hurried up the tracks and flagged down an approaching train. She turned the free pass down though, stating she had done what any good citizen would do.

*Amidst the dark blue Mountains  
Of my Montana home  
I love its sunny fountains  
As through its woods I roam.*

*When wandering o'er its dark green hills  
I sometimes wend my way  
I love to hear the murmuring rills  
Make music day by day.*

*And oftentimes entranced I gaze  
Upon the setting sun  
Upon its gorgeous tinted rays  
When its days' work is done.*

- **Died in 1900.** In her final years, Anna lived with her daughter and son-in-law, Mary Ross and Kenneth Ross in Missoula Montana. She had lost her eyesight but not her vision of Montana's beauty.



*\*Note: Cornelius "Baron" O'Keefe went on to become a successful rancher in the Missoula area. He was the first probate judge of the county and county commissioner for twelve years. He was a Democrat but his favor with people held him in high regards with the*

*general public. So, although he slightly stretched the truth to gain Annie's favor before they wed, he eventually provided her with a very plentiful lifestyle of comfort.*

*Anna's ancestry would have made her a Catholic ,however she is not buried with her husband in St Mary's Catholic cemetery. It is believed that she possibly had joined the Scottish Presbyterian Church as both her daughters were Protestant. Her scrapbook and writings are on record at the Mike and Maureen Mansfield Library on the University of Montana campus. The O'Keefe history is noted in John Toole's family history "The Baron, The Logger and Me".*