

JOHN LAUE

Floating Tunnels, 2019
Archival photographic print, 8 x 6 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

LISA FRANCESCA

Westering to Oakland

Moving from the East
Coast to Oakland in 1905

Imagine what the train ride from New England to Oakland in 1905 might have been like for Helen, an East Coast girl freshly married: the comfort, the sound, moving past fluid landscapes and sometimes peeking into lit kitchen windows and back yards. Imagine leaving your home in Connecticut, where so much of the road is covered by leafy trees and the only bits of sky come into view around neatly kept farms. Coming from this to the great skies over sweeping plains and prairies, through the majestic Rockies to the great alkaline wasteland of Utah, and from Sierra snows to the broad Sacramento Valley. Helen was bound for a new landscape and an unseen home, with her handsome new husband by her side. They were to honeymoon in Yosemite.

That same year, President Theodore Roosevelt would sign into law the act redrawing the boundaries of Yosemite National Park. The following year, the state of California would turn its portions of the park over to the federal government. Roosevelt would do this inspired by his days spent camping with the great naturalist John Muir, who occasionally wrote articles for Helen's father at the *Century Magazine*.

Helen and Maurits would have seen more large trees across the valley floor than there are today, but not that many more because of the carefully controlled burns by generations of Miwok. The valley was filled with quail, grouse, deer, bears, panthers, and coyotes. According to family lore, Helen had an impromptu horseback race with a local native—I would guess an Ahwahnichí man of the southern Sierra Miwok people. The very next year, the Ahwahnichí were forcibly removed from Yosemite Valley to preserve land for the national park.

Hotels and guides were plentiful, but Maurits and Helen decided to camp in a tent. Our family has a story about that, too. Early next morning, Helen slipped out, dampened a cloth in the icy water from her canteen, washed herself, and dressed. When all was tidy, she found the flour and salt and an egg and beat everything together. Then she busied herself stoking the campfire to a steady flame, found the spider griddle and placed it on top, and poured some of the batter. By the time Maurits poked his curly head out of the tent, the pancake had been flipped.

Helen was feeling proud and wifely. She had baked spice cakes, but this was her first griddle cake. Maurits

washed up and sat by the fire, tin plate on his knee, flapjack on the plate. He bit into it and frowned.

"My dear wife, have you ever made pancakes before?"
"Why, no. Is there something wrong with it?"

Maurits set his jaw in a look that would become very, very familiar to her. He swiftly rose with his plate, rummaged in his satchel, and with a mallet nailed the offending flapjack to a tree. He stopped to gaze at Helen, still sitting by the fire, half amused and half perplexed. Then he removed his gun from its holster, took aim, and shot the pancake. The shots echoed through the valley floor this early morning.

They ended up eating oatmeal (that Maurits made) and drinking strong black coffee. Helen would eventually learn to cook well, and this story would be told for generations. But what is overlooked in the many humorous retellings is Helen's dawning awareness that her loving family and tutors and her years of schooling had actually done little to prepare her for marriage and housekeeping, and that her handsome new husband would be opinionated . . . forceful . . . blunt.

* * *

A genteel Easterner, Helen might have appreciated Oakland's orderly streets with residences, schoolhouses, and churches, and long lines of evergreen trees stretching toward the Bay. As described in W. C. Bartlett's essay for John Muir's travelogue *Picturesque California: Oakland* was "a city of homes and schools, and as an educational center people are drawn to it from all parts of the Pacific coast. Like Brooklyn, it catches the overflow of a larger city; and it draws to it the best elements. The turbulent and disorderly are not attracted."

Helen was introduced as "my wife" into Maurits's family household of five men and two other women, all of whom spoke Dutch most of the time: Peter Jan (P.J.), the great bald patriarch with a white beard and a tiny dip in his skull; Maurits's brothers, Ernst, James, and Justus Jan; his mother, Adele; and sister, Virginie. It might have been a tight fit, all those adults. Helen was a long way from home and had not yet picked up any Dutch.

What did young Helen do with her days? How did she help around the house? There were likely to be servants in this household. The aristocratic Van Löben Sels

family was considered one of the most prominent families in Northern California business and social circles. Maurits had been born in the old De Fremery home known as the Grove, a lot in Oakland that comprised nearly six blocks near Eighteenth Street and Adeline. A community park still exists there, one of the oldest in the city. Maurits's father, P.J., was a Dutch consul with a business in San Francisco. P.J., a Utrecht University graduate whose family had a moated castle near The Hague, had married Adele, the San Francisco-born daughter of the pioneer Jacobus "James" de Fremery.

James had famously come over by ship from the Netherlands in 1848 with thousands of pairs of Dutch wooden clogs in the hold. He thought the gold rush miners might want to keep their feet dry and warm in San Francisco, but his funny-looking shoes were mocked by every storekeeper. He returned to his ship and split every last pair for kindling, which he sold at a great profit in the wood-starved city. Later, he founded the Savings Union Bank of San Francisco. He also wrote *Mortgages in California: A Practical Essay* in 1860, a deeply footnoted book as dry as unbuttered toast.

Maurits grew up at the Grove with his parents, brothers, and sister, Virginie. The Van Löben Sels family would eventually donate or sell several huge family portraits and works by Dutch masters, which hung in the family home, to the newly established de Young Museum in San Francisco. Maurits's father, P.J., wrote in his memoir:

The Grove was a big place, covering six or eight blocks in what was once believed destined to be the coming residential district of Oakland. It was covered with a dense growth of primeval oaks. Majestic, bent, gnarled, some were several hundred years old. Some had been blown over by the prevailing west winds. A dense growth of wild blackberries and other vines and bushes filled the spaces between the trees and in places hung from the branches—a sight to please the gods in the springtime. It was a breeding place of the California quail, hundreds of which, as also an occasional rabbit, would be seen roaming in their natural habitat. The quail would sometimes be quite tame, feeding in droves just outside our windows. And sometimes we would trap them in order to feast on quail-on-toast, at one time a very favorite dish in these

parts. Personally, I always thought the meat to be tasteless and dry.

The *Oakland Tribune* had been filled with mentions of the Van Löben Sels brothers at this debutante ball, that cotillion *en masque*, or another birthday party wherein the game of hearts was played. The papers were often breathless. "Hundreds of invitations were issued," said one. "The spacious apartments were thronged with people. The house was brilliantly lighted throughout with electricity." Maurits had ample opportunity to get to know members of the fair sex in his age group in Oakland, but when he met Helen at Cornell (discussing the merits of a bull), he found her more compelling than anyone.

Virginie, a few years younger than Maurits, never warmed to our new bride, Helen. Before he went away to Cornell, Maurits had had a terrible bout of mastoiditis, thanks to an unresolved middle ear infection. Most of his eighteenth or nineteenth year he had spent months at home, head wrapped like Van Gogh, languishing in darkness and quiet. Perhaps of all the siblings, Virginie had grown closest to her brother, patiently reading to him and caring for him, and she may well have resented the new, fashionable woman who arrived and took up all of Maurits's time.

It might have been difficult for Helen to acclimate to the new household, who were not much like her parents. Maurits explained his family was not from "Holland," but from the Netherlands, and why the wording made a difference. He taught her the words *dank u wel* (thank you) and *alstublieft* (please). Helen heard how closely *alstublieft* echoes the courtly "as you please" and marveled at how Dutch bridges English and German.

After they finished dinner, they sat back and "*de oude man*," P.J., told Helen a story that he would later recount in his memoir.

"My dear wife and I, always liking to have the children with us, sharing and guiding their pleasures and desiring as much as possible to spend life out-of-doors, were wont on all sorts of occasions to pack the entire family, the maid, and Major," and here he motioned to the dog sleeping by his chair, "in the big red wagon, ever faithful companion of over twenty years.

"Early in the morning, right after breakfast, the word would be set forth and off all would go, each to his appointed

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task. Maurits and Jim would harness the horses and pack feed, Ernst would grease the axles, Virginie would make sandwiches, cut meat and bread for the picnic lunch, and Justus Jan would fill and sling canteens and serve as courier general. I do not know what I did except the driving and superintending."

He paused and stared at Helen, nodding his head meaningfully in the direction of Maurits. "In this regard the doctrine has of late been enunciated that I made my boys do all the work, worked them too hard. Perhaps that is right, but I know that the system worked well in producing a fair and healthy lot of manly men, alert, helpful, always ready to jump in and assist in anything going on, knowing how to do things, how to tackle a job. I have no apologies to make." Maurits smiled apologetically at Helen and her heart surged with sympathy and pride for her husband as a boy.

The old man continued, "I remember a picnic, such a picnic as I have described, to Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. We had been away all day. I remember, at the

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corner of California and Market Streets, while returning at 5:00 p.m. toward the ferry, looking back and seeing Major following our wagon. Wagons did not go via the creek route but were transferred onto the big white ferry boats that carried the thousands of passengers crossing every twenty minutes of the day.

“We made our ferry, and then, nearing the Oakland side and preparing to disembark—no Major. It appeared that our dear companion had been blocked at the boarding gates at the pier in San Francisco. My dear wife wanted me to go right back, but I was sure that a dog of his intelligence would know how to fool a gatekeeper and would find his way home. So we continued on our way, and I was lazy and tired and I stayed home.

“The next day, Sunday, again my wife wanted me to go, and again I declined to do so. The last thing I heard

Monday morning as I left for my day’s work was the exhortation: ‘Don’t fail to bring back Major!’ I promised readily, but had first to go to the Oakland courthouse to take care of a legal matter, and it was approaching noon by the time I finished. I am ashamed to say I had forgotten all about the dear dog, and so continued routinely on my way to San Francisco.

“Imagine, if you can, the densely packed crowds at the ferry terminal, surging every twenty minutes through the narrow gangway giving access to Market Street. As I was moving along as part of such a surge, something like a cyclone hit me, something fierce and strong and dark and wild, moving at once all over, around and through me. It took me moments to realize what was happening. The crowd gave way, and there was that fine dog, who had been watching the hundreds of thousands of legs that had passed that very spot from Saturday, 5:00 p.m. to Monday noon, say forty-three hours, without having had anything to eat or drink or a place to sleep, determined that no pair of legs he knew was to pass through unclaimed.”

“Goodness,” Helen exclaimed, thinking this was an unconscionable way to treat a dog. “What happened then?”

“Why, we went to my office in a car and I got him a bone to eat and water to drink. These he dispatched ravenously and then fell asleep exhausted at my feet in the consulate, corner of Sacramento and Montgomery Streets.” He leaned down and stroked old Major’s ears.

Helen stood in the kitchen of her in-laws’ grand house, watching Adele, the matriarch, make salad for Maurits and his father and brothers in the Dutch way, the way the men in the family were accustomed to eat. Adele de Fremery, a San Francisco native, was partly Dutch, too; her father, James de Fremery, was a Dutch consul just like her husband. Later, they were to become dear friends, but a slight chill may have still existed between her and this tall, awkward Yankee college girl, Helen, who had evidently not worked much in the kitchen before. Adele may have not quite forgiven her son for bringing this lanky, headstrong girl home from Cornell.

“The lettuce must be fatigued—*fatiguée*, *FatiGUÉE*, *comme ça*,” she instructed. She took a wooden spoon and beat the leaves of fresh, crisp iceberg lettuce until at last

they submitted into a green cape draped along the inside of the large wooden bowl. Helen reflected on that forlorn lettuce. It hadn’t a chance under this woman’s beringed fists.

* * *

The honeymoon had borne some fruit. When Helen was heavily pregnant, her father and mother took the train from Yonkers to stay with the Oakland household, a trip they would take annually for decades while William Webster (called W.W.) nurtured his national lecture tour. On an April afternoon in 1906, W.W. and Maurits’s father, P.J., got along like old friends, swapping stories in the parlor over cigars and brandy, while Helen attempted to rest upstairs. Like P.J., W.W. loved a good adventure, and like P.J., he considered foreigners, women, and animals to be mere background in his travels, hardly warranting a voice of their own.

“When I made a trip to the Mediterranean with my family,” said W.W. to P.J., “I took with me the first Kodak I had ever seen—a long, oblong box which only made round pictures, and you pulled a string to do it. In Tangier the natives dislike photographs—a reproduction of one’s Mohammedan self in a picture may make trouble for the original in another world—and I carried my Kodak done up like a brown-paper parcel, a small hole in the end for the lens, another for the string. It worked fairly well excepting that the click sometimes betrayed me.”

They both chuckled, and he continued to reminisce. W.W. had worked on an article by Theodore Roosevelt; he had been rather intimidated when Rudyard Kipling came to the Century offices to argue about royalties while working with Mary Mapes Dodge on *The Jungle Book*; he corresponded with Jack London and had visited London’s mother while in Oakland. W.W.’s father-in-law had once lived in the same boarding house with Edgar Allan Poe, who was in the depths of poverty. “Each boarder had to heat his own room,” said W.W., “and my father-in-law lent Poe a stove to keep him warm, and sometimes helped him out with his board money.”

Maurits might have been sitting in that room, but not as an active participant in these conversations between fathers-in-law. As his son, Maurits Just, would write many years later, “To my father, the measure of a man was in his ability and readiness to handle his end of an eight-foot

cross-cut saw; to load beans (hundred-pound bags) all day; to yo-heave-ho five-wire bales of hay. That’s not where W.W. was, or ever had been. Conversely, conversing simply for the joy of give and take, or writing, editing, publishing, and consorting with those who did—that was not for Maurits.”

* * *

Despite the pillows, Helen could not get comfortable. She lay upstairs in the Oakland house attended by Bridget Martin, her childhood maid and cook, who had ventured out West with Helen’s parents to assist with her labor. Maurits made plans with friends to go duck hunting in the delta the next morning, knowing he would be consumed with anxiety and therefore useless around the birth of this first child, and he spent the night on one of the house’s broad covered sleeping porches. Well before dawn on April 18, he woke and crept out in stocking feet with his gear, putting his boots on outside so as not to wake anyone. He was far away, almost ready to embark upriver on the *Delta Queen*, when the rumbling started. It was a catastrophic earthquake—the quake—that set San Francisco on fire for days.

Of the event, W.W. would later write in his family memoir: “Our Bridget, who came with us, had her jaw broken by a falling book-case as she sat on Helen’s bed, holding her hand. I went after a doctor for her and for Helen—of course, all telephones were knocked out—and I saw the devastation of Oakland in its very first stage that morning—a church spire lying across Telegraph Avenue, and every one of the 40,000 chimneys in Oakland down.”

The sleeping porch where Maurits had lain just hours earlier had become a dusty pile of chimney bricks. The family gazed at the pile, speechless. The next day, Maurits and Helen’s first daughter, Helen Adele Elizabeth, was born.

Lisa Francesca earned an MFA in creative nonfiction from San Jose State University and a BA in English from the University of California, Berkeley. The author of *The Wedding Officiant’s Guide* (Chronicle Books, 2014), she has published several articles in lifestyle magazines and a handful of poems in literary journals.