# SARAH "SADIE" THOMPSON OLDS

## At A Glance



**Sarah Olds, 1915**
From *Twenty Miles From a Match*

**Birth:** May 9, 1875, Richland Township, Wapello County, Iowa

**Death:** December 10, 1963, Quincy, California

**Maiden Name:** Sarah Elizabeth Thompson

**Race/nationality/ethnic background:** White

**Marriage:** Albert J. Olds, 1898, Tuolumne, California

**Children:**
Edson Burchard Olds (1899-1973)
Jessie Mildred Olds (1902-1981)
Alice Carmen Olds (1903-1951)
Leslie Mabel Olds (1907-1996)
Albert J. Olds Jr. (1908-1998)
Martha Olds (1912-1997)

**Primary city and county of residence and work:**
Reno/Pyramid Lake, Washoe County, Nevada

**Major fields of work:** Writer, homesteader

**Other role identities:** Mother, wife

## Northern Nevada homesteader, farmer left a legacy of stories

Struggling as the wife of an itinerant miner and mother of six children, Sarah Thompson Olds saved enough to buy land for a ranch in northern Nevada. She and her husband established a one-room schoolhouse on their ranch where all their children were educated. Throughout her adulthood, she wrote about her life of work on the homestead in detail, stories that were her legacy to her daughters, who published them after her death.

Sarah Elizabeth Thompson was born on May 9, 1875, in Wapello County, Iowa. Her parents were Alexander Thompson and Mary Harper Thompson. She was the youngest of nine children and was the last child to stay at the house after her siblings had moved out. Both of her parents became ill in her teenage years, and Sarah nursed them both until they died: her father in 1893, her mother in 1896. By age 21, she was headed to California, with only some education as a dressmaker to help her in the new West.

Sarah, who also went by Sadie, first settled in Sonora, California as an eligible single woman and dressmaker. She courted several men who could provide a comfortable lifestyle, including a doctor and a mine foreman. But it was the gruff miner Albert J. Olds who caught her eye. Although he belonged to the distinguished Olds family of California,

(Albert's father participated in California's Constitutional Convention), Albert eschewed comfort for the glint of gold.

But they were not courting. Albert did not give any hints of feelings towards Sadie. He left town to mine in Bodie in early 1898, and Sadie missed him dearly. He returned to Sonora several weeks later, professing his love, as he had equally missed her. They got married on Valentine's Day that year, although Albert had to borrow $20, as he did not have the money necessary to file the marriage certificate. Sadie first learned how old her husband was when he wrote his age as 39 on their marriage certificate—he was 16 years her senior!

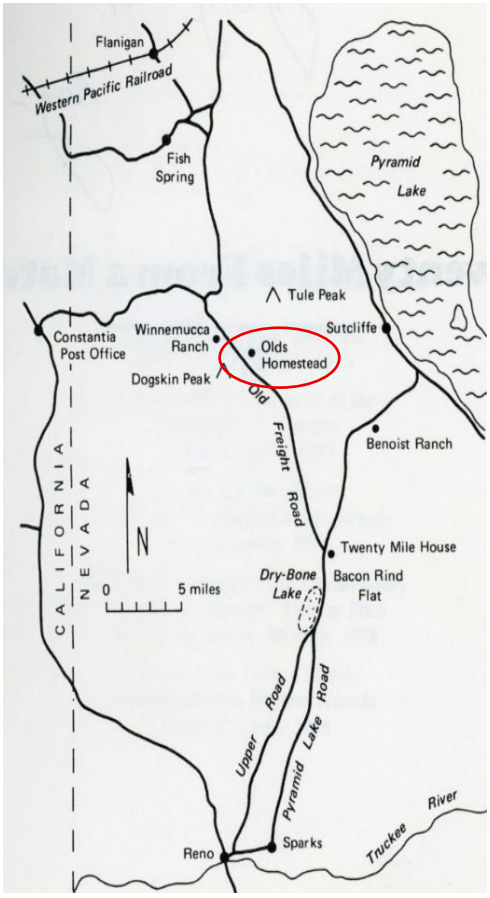
After a year, they moved to Oregon but did not want to set down roots. For the next 12 years, they moved wherever the dirt seemed rich. Their first child, Edson Burchard Olds, was born while they were still in the Sonora, California area in 1899. Jessie Mildred came in 1902, while the family was living in Bisbee, Arizona. By 1903, Alice Carmen had joined the family in Virginia City, Nevada. Leslie Mabel was born in 1907, while the family was just starting to settle near Wadsworth, Nevada. By the time Albert Jr. and Martha came in 1908 and 1912, they had finally found a permanent home in the Silver State.



Back: **Sarah, Jessie**.
Front: **Alice, Leslie, Martha, Albert**.
From *Twenty Miles From a Match*

But it wasn't all good: they settled down in Washoe County due to Albert's diagnosis and quick progression of silicosis, or miner's consumption, which prevented him from continuing his career as an underground miner. They moved to Virginia City from Reno in 1905, and Sadie dreamt of buying a ranch and starting a homestead. By that time, they had four children with another on the way, very little money, and a physically ill head of household. But that didn't stop her determination. She convinced Albert to homestead, and they gathered savings and resources to start their ranching and farming goals. In 1907, the Olds bought land near Tule Peak and Pyramid Lake, north of Reno. Sadie thrived on the hard work required to run a ranch. In her memoir, *Twenty Miles From A Match*, she wrote extensively about her married life, eventual motherhood, and ranching adventures. They collected dogs, horses, sheep, cows, and turkeys, and irrigated the harsh high desert to grow alfalfa, potatoes, beets, onions and carrots, among other crops. When Sadie wasn't able to help with parts of the ranch, Edson stepped in as the oldest son. He trapped and skinned coyotes for money, shot livestock on the farm when they needed to be put down, and helped with vermin.

Albert Sr. was still weak from the silicosis, but he was no longer getting worse while living on the homestead.




**Olds Homestead.**
Map from *Twenty Miles From a Match*.

Sadie and Albert Sr. heavily prioritized education and went out of their way to start a school on their homestead. They built a one-room schoolhouse and hired a teacher each year to come to teach the children. Edson was educated until 6th grade, after which he stopped to help on the homestead. But all of their other children were educated through high school, and the four girls all received degrees from the University of Nevada Normal School. Their efforts would pay off, as all four of the Olds girls would go on to educate Nevada children—a combined 120 years of teaching spread across their careers.

By 1926, all of her children had left the ranch to start their own lives, and Albert's health was worsening. They sold the land the homestead was on to buy the Sutcliffe resort on Pyramid Lake, and Sadie's main priority became taking care of Albert. He eventually passed in 1931 at the age of 71. After his death, Sadie sold the Sutcliffe resort and moved back to Reno and bought the Alamo Guest Ranch on Lakeside Drive. He had lived for 20 years after his initial diagnosis, which Sadie attributed to the fresh air and overall lifestyle on their homestead. She never remarried.

Instead, she kept busy by helping in leadership positions at the Reno Unity Center church, giving charitable donations to other members of the community, vacationing all across North America, and visiting her children and grandchildren, who were scattered across the state.

She passed away painlessly on December 10, 1963, while visiting her son Albert Jr. in Quincy, California. She stayed sharp and active until her very last days. Sadie is buried at Mountain View Cemetery, Reno, Nevada, near her husband Albert and three of her daughters; Alice Olds Raker. Leslie Mabel Olds Zurfluh, Martha Olds Byrnes.




After her death, her daughters found the manuscript of her homesteading stories and published them in 1978. Because of this, Sadie Olds has been celebrated for her funny, thoughtful writing style and detailed look into what life was like in rural Nevada in the early 20th century.

In 2003 the Washoe County School District considered Sarah Olds for the name of a new elementary school in Spanish Springs. It was to honor her opening one of the first schools in Nevada and for her four daughters who became teachers.

Published Work

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