By the Colorado, Between worlds

Tracing the path Olive Oatman took when she left her Indian captors 150 years ago.

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OVER THE COLORADO RIVER, DUCKS WERE FLYING in place against the wind and empty night crawler tubs skittered across the road. Despite the gale, I left the shelter of my car to crouch by a deserted boat ramp. Scooping a white shell from the water, I inhaled the river scent and dropped the souvenir in my pocket. Checking to see that no one was around, I dipped a finger in river mud and painted five vertical lines from my lower lip to my chin, in imitation of the tribal tattoos Indian captive Olive Oatman wore.

An exploration of this region, where Olive lived with the Indians 150 years ago, had been incubating in my imagination for years. I first saw the photo of a white woman in Victorian dress, tattoos on her chin, in a little museum in Gila Bend, Ariz. Mesmerized, I read everything about her I could find.

The Oatman family, California-bound emigrants traveling from Illinois by covered wagon, was attacked by Indians (thought to be Yavapais) near Gila Bend in 1851. Six of the nine members of the family were killed. Two daughters, Maryann, 8, and Olive, 13, were kidnapped by the tribe.

After living with their captors for about a year, the girls were traded for beads, blankets and two horses to a band of Mohave (a historical spelling of Mojave). At some point, Olive's face and arms were tattooed. Anthropologists have differing explanations for Olive's tattoos, but they may have meant the tribe no longer viewed her as an outsider.

The girls' new home was in the Mohave Valley, near present-day Needles — the scene of my own riverside chin-painting ritual.

It would be five years before Olive would leave this valley. To rejoin the non-Indian world, she had to walk and swim for nine days south along the Colorado River to Yuma, Ariz. — about 200 miles — living on seeds and pumpkins.

I started from my home in Palm Springs, driving first to Needles through wide-open desert, with the next two days devoted to winding those 200 miles south along the Colorado. I arrived at the river's banks on an October night, with a full moon over Avikwa'ame, or Spirit Mountain, one of the first things Olive saw when she arrived here.

The next morning, the car rocked in the wind as I hunted down breakfast, settling on Munchy's, a three-table cafe by the Needles railroad station. I ate enough toast and potatoes for a burly brakeman while whistles shrieked. It was a cold, mournful day — a good day for looking for a gravesite. Three years after Olive and Maryann arrived in the Mohave camp, the frailer Maryann died during a drought. Olive buried her younger sister with her own hands.

To ask about the grave, I took a short walk to the Needles Regional Museum. Volunteer Jacklyn Lyman told me the exact burial place had never been found, but she pointed out the area where Olive most likely buried her sister — alongside El Garces Harvey House and Train Station, an old depot awaiting restoration.

When I drove down to survey the river, it was obvious that my plan of following the water wouldn't be easy. Damming, flooding and dredging have changed the course of the Colorado many times since Olive's day. The Mohave village where she lived — thought to be on the California side— is now under water. The riverside mesquite, willow and cottonwood forests have mostly vanished.

South on Arizona 95 from Needles, I passed adult emporiums, fields of sheep. "Mountains of the Moon" by the Grateful Dead was on the car stereo, mirroring the landscape all around me — leaning spires, domes and pinnacles shrouded in blowing dust.

I intended to walk along the river where Olive did (at least in places), but in many spots private property blocks access.

At the Havasu National Wildlife Refuge, I finally found the shoreline trail I was looking for. Mesquite branches clattered in the wind; waterfowl bobbed and screeched.

I walked, turquoise river to my right, and thought about the mysteries surrounding Olive's story. Did she really have

two children with a Mohave chief's son? Was that walk to Yuma a rescue or a second severing from family? Some historians think Olive was happy among the Mohave and wanted to stay.

I crossed the river a few times to avoid the tourist zones along the water ("Beer, Boats, Babes!" a sign said). In Parker, Ariz., just under halfway, I checked into the Kofa Inn, a classic desert cinderblock motel with a beckoning neon sign.

Scouting for food, I noticed all the cars in town seemed to be parked at the Crossroads Cafe. It was homey, with a railroad mural on the wall and orange-vested railroad workers and Mohave Indians filling the tables. It occurred to me that if the legends of marriage to a chief's son were true, Olive might have a descendant right there in the Crossroads.

South of Parker, the Colorado River Indian Tribes — a confederation that owns much land along the river — has established the 'Ahakhav Tribal Preserve to restore the lower Colorado River habitat as it was before dams and development. Here the next morning I found vegetation similar to what Olive might have seen on her walk, though now the willows are watered by miles of irrigation line.

For much of my trip it had been hard to conjure up Olive. The river is shrunken from its natural grandeur; the tacky tourist towns do nothing to invite the past. Here in the preserve — walking through a forest of young yellow cottonwoods, inhaling the marshy river beyond the trees — I finally felt the connection I'd been looking for. It was easy to imagine Olive striding barefoot along shore or swimming the Colorado — wide, red and muddy in the 1850s.

As I drove south on Arizona 95, the mountains gave way to scrub- covered hills. In Yuma, I drove up a lone hill to visit old Ft. Yuma.

In 1856, the military based here dispatched a messenger to the Mohave camp up north, insisting the Indians hand Olive over for a gift of beads and trinkets. So began her nine-day trek along the river, accompanied by the messenger and Indian escorts.

Ariving at Ft. Yuma, she shed her bark skirt at the request of an officer's wife and replaced it with a calico dress. Questioned by officers, she was mute. Here she was later reunited with her brother, Lorenzo. His face had been bashed in during the attack and Olive assumed he had died, but Lorenzo had managed to walk to safety and had been searching for his sister for years. Olive was so shocked to see him alive she was unable to speak for more than an hour.

Her story didn't end with her return. Enlisted by a showman, she went on the lecture circuit to talk about her Indian life. She eventually married a banker. At home in Sherman, Texas, she wore a veil to cover her tattoos when she went to town.

The captive left the river here in Yuma, and so did I. As I headed home I took the white shell out of my pocket and took a last whiff of the Colorado River, Olive's long road.