



## Footnote to History

# THE IDAHO TERRITORIAL PENITENTIARY'S FIRST FEMALE INMATE

by Fred E. Woods

*While doing research on the experience of Mormon polygamists incarcerated at the Idaho Penitentiary, Fred Woods became curious about a woman imprisoned there at the same time. He teaches religion and history at Ricks College and is continuing his research on intriguing episodes and "underknown" characters in Idaho's history.*

*The photograph above, taken in 1890, shows the structures on the Fort Hall Reservation built for the United States Army and later used for a reservation school (ISHS 853). On the opposite page are winter quarters for Bannock Indians, a sagebrush windbreak behind them, taken about the same time (ISHS 77-69.9).*

**T**HE IDAHO PENITENTIARY'S Convict Register names "Heneba" as the first female inmate received, on May 31, 1887. Next to her name is written in parentheses "squaw."<sup>1</sup> For many years it has been unclear whether "Heneba" was her first or last name and what the background of this mysterious Native American was. Information about her age at the time of her incarceration, her family life, and the details of her later years and death have eluded historians. Although scholars have been aware of her trial, arrest, and conviction,<sup>2</sup> these other questions have gone unanswered.

The prison recorder described Heneba as being 5' 3Vi" tall and having a "copper" complexion, with black hair and black eyes. She was given a three-year sentence for manslaughter—the death of her first husband—but was eligible to be discharged as early as November 30, 1889.<sup>3</sup>

Five months after Heneba entered the penitentiary, the Eagle Rock newspaper carried an article about her under the heading "She Got There!"

Heneba, a squaw who was sent to the penitentiary from Blackfoot for three years for memeloosing her husband, escaped one evening last week<sup>4</sup> by shinning over the high board fence. She was the only lady convict, and somewhat of a trusty. At the hour of locking in the cells she was sent into the yard for her bucket, and not returning soon as expected, the turn-key went to see what detained her.<sup>5</sup>

Heneba was nowhere to be found. She had shaken the dust of the prison yard from her moccasins, climbed the fence as would a bear and disappeared in the gloaming. Warden Hailey immediately instituted a hunt for her, and himself and several assistants were out all night scouring the country, but failed to find her. A reward of \$50 is offered for her capture, or \$25 for information leading to her apprehension.

<sup>1</sup>The names and personal data for each inmate recorded in the Convict Register indicate that the information was written by one recorder as the prisoners were received at the Penitentiary. It seems very unlikely that "Heneba" would refer to herself as a "squaw."

<sup>2</sup>Robert G. Waite, "Necessary to Isolate the Female Prisoners: Women Convicts at the Old Idaho Penitentiary," *Idaho Yesterdays* (Fall, 1985), 29/3:2-3, and Susan Stacy, "'Our Ward is Rather Small,'" *Idaho Yesterdays* (Summer, 1994), 38/2:22.

<sup>3</sup>Convict Register.

<sup>4</sup>The Convict Register records her escape on October 24, 1887. "Memeloosing" is jargon referring to the killing of one Indian by another.

<sup>5</sup>Alexander Nephi Stephens, incarcerated for unlawful cohabitation, identified the turnkey at this time as Frank McDonald. Stephens began serving his sentence the same month that Heneba made her escape. See *Diary of Alexander Nephi Stephens*, Archives Division, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

When sentenced the officers all said she would not attempt to escape, and recommended that Warden Hailey let her do her work about the house instead of being kept in the pen. Henebe, in abusing the confidence reposed in her, acted very unlady like. She was a holy terror at the sewing machine, and not lazy.

Once over the prison fence, she had headed for home (200 miles away) and was immediately caught by the Indian police on the Fort Hall Reservation.<sup>6</sup> The Convict Register recorded that Heneba was returned to the penitentiary on November 7, 1887. A story in the Blackfoot newspaper two days earlier reported that she had been apprehended and that the Indians would get the reward promised by the warden.<sup>7</sup>

Heneba's capture on the reservation provided a clue for further research. Variations of her name appear several times in the available census records at Fort Hall dating from 1890 through 1912.<sup>8</sup> The first time the name Heneba/Henebe<sup>9</sup> occurs in the Fort Hall census records is in 1890, when she is accounted for as a thirty-year-old Native American from the Bannock tribe—making her twenty-seven years old at the time of her incarceration. The census record also reveals that she had married Pepetuah Aratse, aged 35, after her release from prison and so was then known as Henebe Aratse. The census information confirms that Heneba or Henebe was her first or given name.

These valuable census records also document the fact that Heneba or Henebe was known to have married four times<sup>10</sup> (three times after her incarceration) and

that as of 1901 she had one known son, who died in 1903. The last time her name is mentioned on the census roll is in 1912, when she would have been fifty-two years old. It is quite probable that Heneba died of tuberculosis, which killed many Native Americans at Fort Hall during this time.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of her prison escape, Heneba was pardoned on June 13, 1888, and released from the penitentiary after serving just over a year there.<sup>12</sup> This colorful Native American certainly deserves a footnote in the annals of the Old Idaho Penitentiary. •

<sup>6</sup>*Idaho Register* (Eagle Rock), November 5, 1887, clipping in "Escapes" file. Old Penitentiary files. Old Idaho Penitentiary, Boise, Idaho.

<sup>7</sup>*Idaho News* (Blackfoot), November 5, 1887, clipping in "Escapes" file.

<sup>8</sup>Ardith M. Peyope, director of the Fort Hall Shoshone-Bannock Library, assisted in the research of these census records. She noted in a letter to the author dated April 12, 1995, that she believed some of the earlier census records had been destroyed when the Indian agent's house had burned down. See Fort Hall (Shoshoni & Bannock Indians). Indian Census Records, 1880-1940. Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm No. 595, Roll #139), for more information.

<sup>9</sup>The name "Heneba" has been written "Henebe" in many documents, and the form "Henebe" occurs seven or eight times in the Old Penitentiary files. Idaho historians have used both. As previously mentioned, the Convict Register uses the name "Heneba" in discussing the penitentiary's first female convict. Apparently the prison recorder vocalized her name with an "a" (as in "bay") rather than an "e" (as in "they"). The vocalization of Heneba also varies in the census records, with spellings including "Henebe" and "Honeve."

<sup>10</sup>The name of her first husband, whom she killed, is not known. Her second husband was Pepetuah Aratse, her third was Buffalo West, and her last known husband was Major Tommy.

<sup>11</sup>Her cause of death was suggested by Ardith M. Peyope.

<sup>12</sup>Convict Register. Stacy, in "'Our Ward is Rather Small," 22, also points out that a grand jury had decided that Heneba's presence was a problem for the other male inmates. She was released just two months after the jury's report was made public.

