

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Book Club Founded

Thirty-nine years ago the Book Club of California was founded. There is a rather interesting story in connection with how it came into being. In 1912 a number of San Francisco book collectors were discussing plans for the Panama Pacific International Exposition which was to be held in 1915. Like similar groups all over the country, these San Franciscans were much interested in the printing revival fathered by William Morris, and the thought occurred to them that a showing of what had been done in that field would make an interesting exhibit at the forthcoming fair.

They accordingly took the matter up with Charles C. Moore who had just been appointed president of the Exposition. Moore, who was himself an ardent collector, thought the idea an excellent one.

Moore thought that the officials would be much more favorably impressed if an organization made the request for show space. There was no organization and up to that point no organization had been planned; however, they thought the matter could be arranged. It was. Two hours later they were back in Moore's office, this time as representatives of a full-fledged collectors' club. The latter had been formed over the luncheon table.

As it happened, the plan of having a showing of fine printing at the 1915 exposition never worked out, but for all the informality of its organization the club itself showed surprising vitality, according to its history recently sent to the membership.

In December 1912, the club was formally organized complete with constitution, by-laws, officers, and a list of fifty-five charter members. Numerous names for the club were rejected in favor of the less romantic but more descriptive title it now bears.

In the beginning the club had its field of usefulness rather clearly defined. On the one hand it could lend encouragement to printers by giving them commissions for books and a free hand as to how to produce them; and on the other, it faced the problem of creating a wider market for the locally produced fine printing.

Without attempting to give the club more credit than it deserves, it may be reasonably said, that it has become an important influence in the creation on the Pacific

Coast of a group of collectors who have an informed understanding of what constitutes sound knowledge to bear in the selection of the books they place on their shelves.

The club's first publication, Robert E. Cowan's "Biography of the History of California and the Pacific West," appeared in 1914, limited to 250 copies. The majority of the publications were produced by such well known printers as John Henry Nash, Taylor and Taylor, and after 1929, the Grabhorn Press. Some of these early titles have since become collectors' items, among them, "The Letters of Ambrose Bierce," "Lillith," "The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci," and Robinson Jeffers' poems. Membership has also grown, and in 1929 it reached 500, the maximum number permitted by its constitution at that date.

In 1933 the club began printing a little quarterly magazine and filled it with news of the activities and material designed to interest collections. Then came the first of the Club Keepsakes annual series of folders or pamphlets. Published monthly each part was published by a different printer.

This year's Keepsake series is of special interest – a series of historical and literary commemorative menus of the west used between the years 1849 and 1879.

Just out is "Muleback to the Convention," letters of J. Ross Browne, the Reporter to the Constitutional Convention at Monterey, September-October, 1849, published by the Book Club of California. The club's books are in limited editions and sold only to club members.

Membership now stands at the highest in the club's history, numbering well over 700. When vacancies exist, the club is open to all who are sympathetic with its aims and whose applications are approved by the Board of Directors. Members are students and collectors of printing and Californiana, or just persons who happen to like what the club is doing.