

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

October 23, 1950

Pioneer Gunsmiths

In "The Handbook of Monterey and Vicinity" published in Monterey in 1875 by Walton and Curtis, now a collector's item, there appears an advertisement: "McClure Bros., Watchmakers and Jewelers. J.E. McClure, Watchmaker and Jeweler; J.P. McClure, Machinist and Gunsmith." They also carried clocks, and hardware, according to the half page advertisement. The place of business was on Washington Street, no number given.

In the September issue of the American Rifleman there is a fascinating article written by James E. Seryen, which should be of interest to sportsmen and historians alike. The story is entitled "San Francisco Gunmakers," and includes a roster of pioneer California gunmakers and gunshops, and their location and approximate dates of operation. Listed are two from Monterey County – R. Clark (1875), Main Street, Salinas, and J.P. McClure (1875), Monterey.

The author begins his history of far west gunmakers, "The first day of April, 1848, gave promise of colorful beauty. Rays from an early sun slanted across the coastal hills and cast shimmering lights on the narrow passage men call the Golden Gate. As the S.S. Oregon turned in from the sea and nosed toward San Francisco Bay, Frank Bekeart stood motionless at the ship's rail, his pulse quickened by the unfolding panorama of what is said to be the largest land-locked harbor in the world. Here at last was San Francisco.

"One of the first of many able gunmakers to pack his tools, get together merchandise needed in the gun trade, and head for California, Frank Bekeart typifies that hardy clan whose adventurous enterprise helped to write some of the most colorful pages in American history."

Only two years before, San Francisco had been known as Yerba Buena (good herb, a Spanish name), inspired by an aromatic herb which grew profusely in the surrounding hills. When a citizen offered to trade Frank Bekeart a lot on Market Street for a caplock pistol, he indignantly refused.

For many years this first gunsmith in California lived near Sutter's Mill at Coloma, on the South Fork of the American River. There he conducted his gun business.

His old store still stands and is now a historical landmark, dedicated by the state.

Later Bekeart transferred his shop to Placerville and in 1865 he returned to San Francisco where he remained active in the gun business until 1890. Philip Kendall Bekeart is currently active in the California firearms trade and is the grandson of Frank (Jules Francois) Bekeart. Philip succeeded his father Philip Baldwin Bekeart.

Frank Bekeart was not California's only pioneer gunmaker. Many expert craftsmen joined the migration to California and the guns built by such men as Ben Biglow, Horace Rowell, Fred Hellinhaus and Charles Slotterbek are listed in the story in the American Rifleman.

Charles Slotterbek started his California labors in the famed shop of A.J. Plate. Plate was an immigrant from Germany who arrived in San Francisco in May of 1850 and set up a small shop on Long Wharf, now Commercial Street. From this humble beginning, Adolphus J. Plate built one of the largest firearms businesses in the West. Two sons joined the business and managed it after his death in 1878.

Many sportsmen on the Peninsula probably own guns and pistols which bear the name A.J. Plate, San Francisco.

Charles Curry, a native of Ireland, arrived in Philadelphia in 1837, where he learned the gun trade and proceeded to San Francisco in 1852. He opened his gun store on Commercial Street and later moved to larger quarters on Battery Street. He was later joined by two brothers, Nathaniel and John. After Charles' death the firm name was changed to N. Curry and Brother.

Robert Liddle was another emigrant gunsmith. When Liddle was 12 years old he was apprenticed to learn the gunsmithing business, which he followed as a journeyman in Baltimore. About 1853 he arrived in California and found employment with P.B. Comins and O.H. Bogart. He later opened his own shop on Long Wharf. Robert Liddle purchased the Bogart "Sportsmen's Emporium," and formed a partnership with Charles Van Buren Kaeding and their names appear on hundreds of firearms owned throughout the West.

The author of the article writes: "My personal nominations for the greatest of California's pioneer gunmakers would certainly include Charlie Slotterbek.

He was granted a patent dated October 5, 1880, for a break-open rifle with hinged barrel, somewhat similar to the familiar shotgun principal. He was one of those rare craftsmen who could build a beautiful gun from a bar of iron and a plank of wood.”

There are many other “firsts” in the gunsmith business in Northern California, but space does not permit their listing. We hope this brief bit of the historical background of some of the earliest and most famous will stimulate interest among gun fanciers as to the history of their most prized possessions.