

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Kipling Found Good Food in S.F. in 1800's

The Book Club of California is justly proud of the 1950 Keepsakes which the membership has received. They compete in character and quality with the last successful Clipper Card Series. It was through rare good fortune, the editor of the Quarterly News-Letter writes, the club has come upon a series of interesting historical and/or literary commemorative menus of the West used between the years 1849 and 1879. Among these cards is Lieutenant Carlin's testimonial dinner at the Bohemian Club, about which Kipling wrote his tirade on Americans and American manners; the Inauguration Ball for Governor Lowe in 1863 (printed on silk); a farewell banquet to General U.S. Grant from the grateful citizens of San Francisco in 1878; a bill of fare for the steamship "Tennessee" for 1850, to mention just a few.

"Devoured a dinner" the reporter wrote, "The memory of which will descend with me into the hungry grave."

It was Rudyard Kipling speaking – Kipling at the age of 24 years and after a week in San Francisco. The dinner was the one whose terrapin, plump pullet roasted, and cold asparagus are so unassumingly listed in this menu. In 1889, the Bohemian Club, whose guest he was, had been in existence a decade and a half and had built up 'a decent cellar'. Young Kipling seemed to have enjoyed everything on the menu; but the oratory annoyed him and he said so. The occasion as the menu shows, was the return of Lieutenant James W. Carlin U.S.N. to San Francisco.

Kipling thought so he later wrote: "that never since the morning stars sang together for joy had a amazed creation witnessed such superhuman bravery as that displayed by the American Navy in the Samoa cyclone." In the end, though, the good dinner had its way with him, and he admitted that he found his hosts, the city itself, both hospitable and charming and he wrote: "It is a mad city, inhabited by perfectly insane people whose women are of remarkable beauty!"

The second of the Bonanza Banquets is the daily menu of the Palace Hotel in San Francisco on the evening of Wednesday, September 10, 1879. Lucius Beebe, noted author and resident of Virginia City, writes in his commentary: "This daily menu in the reign of Ernest

Arbogast as chef de cuisine, gives what is perhaps a more accurate if less robust picture of the dining habits of well-to-do Californians and travelers in America's most opulent caravansary. ***the guest was free to command nine courses if he pleased. *** What in this fragrant souvenir of the heroic past, does arouse the envy of amateur and oenophile alike is the profusion and magnificence of the wine list and its amusements of modest prices."

The third is a very colorful menu card from the Lick House on April 28, 1868, when a complimentary banquet was given to Hon. Anson Burlingame, and the Chinese Ambassadors. The American and the Chinese flags, printed in color, are crossed as decoration for the cover.

In Oscar Lewis' commentary in the folder which accompanies each menu reproduction, he explains why the visit of these gentlemen brought forth so prodigious an offering of food and drink. The answer is, according to Lewis, that the Californians of the day looked on it as a very important occasion indeed. The "Embassy Party" had been created by order of the Emperor himself, and were armed with authority to negotiate treaties and trade agreements "with every country in Christendom", and it was everywhere regarded as evidence that the Chinese had decided to abandon their age-old policy of isolation. It was on July 28, that Burlingame and Secretary Seward concluded at Washington a bilateral agreement liberalizing the immigration laws of both countries which presently caused both to be roundly denounced in California.

Before the Embassy party's departure, the city's leading banker, William C. Ralston, entertained the visitors at his country home at Belmont. Next morning while driving to San Francisco with his guest of honor, Ralston pointed out the area of rolling hills and announced that he was planning to put it on the market, adding that he had decided to solve the problem of what to call it by conferring on it the name of his companion. Thus the peninsula town of Burlingame is an added present-day reminder of the Chinese Embassy Party's sojourn here more than eighty years ago.

The San Francisco Medical Benevolent Society, forerunner of the California Academy of Medicine, was organized in 1870, apparently not for the currently popular motive of benevolence, but to create and maintain a medical library and a museum of pathology, and to publish a professional journal. So thinks

Salvatore Lucia, who composed the commentary for the menu reproduction of the sixth annual banquet of the Society held at "The Baldwin" on January 31, 1880. The menu illustrates two of these purposes and adds another conviviality, Lucia goes on to report on the food and the list of wines which should accompany each course.