

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 6, 1950

Story of 'Dame Shirley'

One of the most delightful books of Western Americana planned as a reprint in connection with California's Centenary Celebrations, was the "Shirley Letters from the California Mines, 1851-52." These letters were written by the author, who called herself "Dame Shirley," to her sister in New England. They were apparently copied by Steve Massett of the Marysville Herald and then sent on to Ferdinand C. Ewer of The Pioneer, of California Monthly Magazine.

This act, as Carl L. Wheat points out in his introduction to the reprint, " ... places us, at this later date, ever more in his debt, for these letters from the Sierra diggings form a priceless contribution to our knowledge and understanding of that long vanished era – the earliest flush days of the great gold rush."

In 1922 Thomas C. Russell printed at his private press in San Francisco another reprint of the Shirley letters. His book was also illustrated with reproductions from contemporary lithographs and woodcuts, as the 1950 editions were.

Whoever is interested in the early history of California, whether as a student or as a casual reader, owes a large debt of gratitude to Mr. Russell, to Carl I. Wheat, and to the early publisher of the Marysville paper, for printing these choice and scarce historical books.

The Shirley letters, written by "Dame Shirley" (Mrs. Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe), are a valuable record of one section of the gold diggings of California in 1851 and '52. They were written with no thought of publication, from Rich Bar and Indian Bar on the North Fork of the Feather River, to Dame Shirley's sister in Amherst, Mass.

In 1854 the Rev. Frederick C. Ewer of San Francisco, a friend of Shirley, eagerly made use of the interesting letters, in the Pioneer, a monthly magazine which he was just establishing. Their publication began with the first number, January 1854, and continued through the life of the magazine, until December 1855.

Bancroft, in Volume VII of his History of California, makes note of the indebtedness to Shirley of later writers on the mining days in California Josiah Royce found in these letters authentic material for his chapter, "The Struggle for Order," in his book on California. The

section, "A Typical History of a Mining Camp in 1851-52," is taken from Shirley's account.

"A marvelously skillful and undoubtedly truthful history," Dr. Royce tells us, "infinitely more helpful to us than the perverse romanticism of a thousand such tales as Mr. Bret Harte's."

Suggestive bits from these letters were undoubtedly seized by Bret Harte and expanded and enlivened by his genius into telling incidents in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." It is even probable that the incident of the tame frog in the barroom furnished Mark Twain with the foundation of his story, "The Jumping Frog" thinks Mrs. Helen Purdy, who wrote a review of the Shirley letters when they were printed in 1922.

Dame Shirley was the pen name of Louise Clappe, who came as a young bride with her husband, Dr. Fayette Clappe, to San Francisco in 1849. She was a gifted and educated girl of high connection in the East. The spirit of adventure was strong within her and, after a sojourn of a year in primitive San Francisco, early in 1851 she followed her physician-husband to the gold diggings of the Sierras, where he had gone in search of health. Mrs. Clappe was small, slight in stature and delicate, but no hardship daunted her indomitable spirit, and mere inconveniences were good-humoredly accepted and transformed by her into treasured experiences, to be afterward recounted by her skillful pen.

Her first impressions of Rich Bar were vividly described. The Empire Hotel which received herself and her husband was "the only building in the settlement with a live upstairs and two or three glass windows," both unknown luxuries in all other buildings. Even the "buildings" were mostly tents, flimsy cloth stretched around a few stakes. The roof of the hotel was covered with green canvas and the barroom lined "with that eternal crimson calico which finishes the whole Golden West." There were only four women in Rich Bar when Mrs. Clappe arrived

During all of her stay at the mines Dame Shirley kept up her cheery letters to her sister in the old New England home. She glossed over nothing. As gambling, thieving, suicide, murder, hangings, floggings and duels alternated with happier sights and she experienced them and described them. To the last she was full of enthusiasm for the beauty and the wonders of California and of appreciation of the good of her fellow

beings. She saw beneath their rough exteriors and found the worth which still dwell beneath the surface in most of them.

After a year and a half Dr. and Mrs. Clappe returned to San Francisco. Here they established a home, but reverses came and Shirley's last years in San Francisco were spent as an inspiring and beloved school teacher. Charles Warren Stoddard who wrote and died in Monterey was one of her pupils.

Mrs. Clappe later returned to her home in the East, living for a time in close association with Mrs. Bret Harte and her children in Morristown, N.J., where she died in 1906.