

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

November 6, 1951

Bags of Gold And Bales of Merchandise

Many of the members of the Constitutional Convention of 1849 came from states using great seals so it was natural for them to wish to provide the new State of California with such an insignia. The use of the Great Seal as a seal, is in lineal descent from the thumb marks and signet rings of the ancient days of the rubrics or flourishes of provincial California, and of the governor's seals in Colonial America

The proposal for a seal was first made at the convention by O.M. Wozencraft, on Sept. 29th, but for some time after that date the matter had been under general discussion. Bayard Taylor, who attended the convention from Sept. 19th until its closing date, recalled in his "Eldorado," that a number of designs were proposed, some "ludicrous enough," but only eight or 10 were presented and of these only one was officially presented and seriously considered – the one proposed by Caleb Lyon and which had been drawn by Major R.S. Garnett.

In the afternoon session of the day that the seal was proposed, a committee was appointed to receive designs, and a few hours later the committee reported that the Lyon Garnett design with a description. In the debate, the design was accepted as a "most happy one," but was regarded more as a coat of arms than a seal. The report was tabled until Oct 2nd when it was fully debated.

Wozencraft, the original proponent of a seal, wished to substitute "bags of gold and bales of merchandise" for the miner and bear; General Vallejo contended that if the bear were to be retained it should "be represented as made fast by a lasso in the hands of a vaquero," and other insisted that their parts of the country should be represented in the seal. The attempted changes in the design failed by a vote of 21 to 16 and the report was then tabled.

According to J. Ross Brown's report of the Debates of the Convention of Monterey, filed in Washington in 1850, there was a slight difference in the explanation and description of the design as entered in the journal of the proceedings.

Browne's explanation reads as follows:

"Around the bevel of the ring are represented 31 stars being the number of states which the Union will consist upon admission of California.

"The foreground figure represents the Goddess Minerva having sprung full grown from the brain of Jupiter. She is introduced as a type of the political birth of the State of California without having gone through the probation of a territory. At her feet crouches a "grizzly" bear feeding upon clusters from a grapevine emblematic of the peculiar characteristics of the country. A miner is engaged with a rocker and bowl at his side, illustrating the golden wealth of the Sacramento upon whose waters are seen shipping typical of commercial greatness and the snow-clad peaks of the Sierra Nevada make up the background while above (is) the Greek motto (I Have Found It) applying either to the principle involved in the admission of the state or the success of the miner at work."

Signed – Caleb Lyon of Lyondale-Monterey, Sept. 26.

This description written three days before the design was presented to the official committee, is still the one in use except for some changes in punctuation, spelling and in substitution of "stands" for "crouches." The word "crouches" was evidently used by Lyon to indicate position rather than posture, for naturalists seem unable to determine the posture of a crouching bear especially when eating. Also the change in words was made later when the bear was standing with its head up rather than down as in the earlier seals. It is to be noted that all master dies of the Great Seal have the bear standing, the only difference is in the position of the head.

On Oct. 11, 1849, the question was raised again; "The Great Seal of the State of California" was voted as an addition to the design, and Lyon was: "Hereby authorized to superintend the engraving of the seal for the state and to furnish the same in the shortest possible time to the Secretary of the Convention with the press and all necessary appendages to be by him delivered to the Secretary of State appointed under the Constitution: that the sum of one thousand dollars be paid to Mr. Lyon in full compensation and payment for design, seal, press, and all appendages." The above is also taken from J. Ross Browne's report.

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