

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Outcasts of Poker Flat

When the motorist travels through the Mother Lode country there are constant reminders that once upon a time Bret Harte and Mark Twain of literary fame, also had traveled that way. At Tuttletown, first settled in the spring of 1848 by a party of Mormon prospectors, one may travel a distance of one mile further to reach Jackass Hill. Here stands a replica of Dick Stoker's cabin – the Mark Twain cabin – the original having been built in 1850.

Dick Stoker was the "Dick Baker" in Twain's "Roughing It." The humorist was also once the guest of the Gillis Brothers on Jackass Hill, and here penned several of his immortal yarns of the gold country.

Going north from Jamestown, the road passes almost under the brow of Table Mountain, part of a large lava flow of prehistoric history. This was the home of Bret Harte's "Truthful James of Table Mountain," the teller of the tale in Harte's famous poem "The Heathen Chinee." Some of the other camps which may have been the inspiration for other Harte stories of the gold rush days are: Heavytrees Hill, Simpson's Bar and Wayne's Bar, all intriguing names. It was the name Fiddletown that inspired Harte to write "An Episode in Fiddletown."

In the early 1860s the citizens of that town did not think the name was dignified enough and by court procedure had it changed to Oleta, Indian for Old Home Springs.

When the Mother Lode country became a mecca for tourists, anxious to recapture some of the feel of the old mining days, Oleta altered its viewpoint and again became Fiddletown, with due pomp and ceremony. Rough and Ready was still another mining town made famous in three of Harte's tales.

Mr. F.W. Heron of San Francisco has supplied us with Ted Malone's Mansions of Imagination Album, in which we have found a delightful little tale about Bret Harte and his visit to Santa Cruz about 1860.

There was, and we hope still is, a "Honeymoon Cottage" nestled in the wooded mountains of Santa Cruz (81 Church street), where a new magazine to be called the "Overland Monthly" was born. Seated in the living room of this peaceful, romantic ivy-covered bungalow Anton Roan and Bret Harte laid plans for the publication of this

early California magazine. Harte remembered the many visits they paid to the cottage and when he married lovely Ann Griswald in 1862 they went there to spend their honeymoon. Before the fireplace he read her the manuscript of "The Luck of Roaring Camp," the publication of which later made him famous.

At 17 Harte set out from Albany for the West and turned up in the frontier town of San Francisco ... he wandered through Chinatown getting acquainted with the "Heathen Chinee" – fought highwaymen, perched high atop a swaying stagecoach gathering material for "Yuba Bill" ... worked at a musty ledger in the old mint – listened to the diatribes of bitter Ambrose Bierce – was fascinated by eccentric Joaquin Miller. He remembered early literary aspirations and resolved to try again – and finally became editor of the Overland Monthly.

In 1879 Harte was offered the consulate of Creffield in Prussia and left California, never to see it again. Malone writes, "but the soul of Bret Harte lies buried, not in an English churchyard, but in some old abandoned mine, near Shantytown, next door to "The Outcasts of Poker Flat."

Thomas Norris has provided a book of eight unpublished limericks and cartoons by Francis Bret Harte as published for a Christmas card by the Grabhorn Press in 1933 for Herbert Lionel Rothchild.

Most of the humorous scenes were laid in the Overland office in San Francisco, then the trip over the high mountains to Santa Cruz, the reception of the staff by the news men of the coast city the presentation of a bill for "\$5 for the hire of the hack," and the illustrations of his limerick concerning a dinner that Dwight the banker, gave to Charles Warren Stoddard, Miss Amber and Bret Harte during the Santa Cruz visit.

Harte became a traveler, a man of affairs, a literary lion, far from the hurly-burly of the frontier – but his tales are still a part of California.