

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 3, 1951

### Hall of Fame

When Hubert Howe Bancroft was asked in 1875 to accept the Republican nomination for Congress, he declined and said: "There are 10,000 ready to serve their country where there was not one to do my work in case I should abandon it."

Hubert Howe Bancroft was California's greatest collector of a library of history and the author of 39 large volumes on the "History of the Pacific States." In bringing to completion this great work he places Californians under lasting obligation and when the University of California acquired his library of possibly fifty thousand separate books, pamphlets, maps and manuscripts, his name was forever honored on the State University campus by The Bancroft Library.

For the benefit of those who have heard and read quotations from Bancroft from all writers and collectors of Californiana, we are delving today into this gentleman's life in California from 1852 until his death in 1918.

Bancroft was born in Granville, Ohio, May 5, 1832, of good New England stock, his great-great-grandfather having come over from London in 1632. His father was a native of Massachusetts, his mother of Vermont. Hubert died March 2, 1918, at Walnut Creek, California.

In bringing to completion his great work on the "History of the Pacific States", Bancroft completed a stupendous labor; the more one looks into it the more one is compelled to admire "the audacity that conceived it and the pertinacity that brought it to completion."

He once confessed himself to be but an artisan, and the mass of raw materials of history which he assembled was never considered a literary masterpiece – but the gathering together of sources and documents for the Bancroft Library and used in preparation of his volumes are indispensable to all subsequent historians of Western America.

Bancroft's formal education was limited being less than the regular preparation for a modern college. At the age of fifteen years he chose to continue his studies rather than enter his brother-in-law's book store. Finally he was lured into active business and city life and when he was sixteen he entered the book store in Buffalo

In 1852 he was sent to California to assist in founding a branch book store in Sacramento. His father had followed the call of gold in 1850. In 1856 young Hubert decided to enter business in San Francisco and opened a store on Montgomery street under the firm name of H.H. Bancroft Company.

In 1862 he made a hurried trip to Europe and in his own words we quote: "ambition became fired and ideas came rushing in on me faster than I could handle them."

In "Literary Industries," the story of the growth of his unique library of history, he has told in detail the story of the growth of that collection of books, maps and manuscripts, the inception of which dates back to 1859 when William H. Knight, then in his employ, was told to clear several shelves around his desk and to furthermore reserve every book in the store having a reference to Western America.

During the next few years Bancroft looked through every store in San Francisco which sold books and every shop in other cities, purchasing copies of any books having reference to his subject – California. Later he visited the East Coast, visiting all bookshops and still buying.

After he had 1,000 books on western history, he visited London and Paris and his eyes were opened, according to "California's Hall of Fame." "And so it was" Bancroft said, "when the collection had reached 1,000 volumes I fancied I had them all; when it had grown to 5,000, I saw it had just begun."

As the collecting grew, his subject grew. And he enlarged it to include the entire western part of North America, Central America and Mexico. He determined to make his library as complete as possible, sparing neither time nor money, nor personal attention. When collections and whole libraries were for sale he bought them at auction in Europe. In 1869 the Bancroft Library contained 16,000 volumes, lodged in the fifth floor of a Market street building.

In 1881 the library was contained in a fireproof building on Valencia street in San Francisco, and Bancroft is quoted as saying that it was "the largest collection of American historical data in the world."

No one can argue the truth of the statement that in collecting his unique and valuable library and in publishing his history, he has conferred a benefit upon

California. He is entitled to be included in California's "Statly Hall of Fame".