

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Family Library for Sale And Barrels of Beans

In all the reading of old manuscripts, old newspapers and countless other recordings of early Monterey, I have yet to find an advertisement for "books for sale" in this city although it is known that many residents in the middle 1800s had libraries and read good books. But there were evidently no bookstores and those who had books did not part with them.

An interesting article appeared in Quarterly News Letter of The Book Club of California recently, concerning "Reading in the Gold Rush," by Gerald Hurley, a teaching assistant in the department of English at the University of California, his Alma Mater. The article started an interest in the subject and a bit of research.

Of course, the discovery of gold brought all kinds of people to California, among others it attracted a rush of men and women who were readers. In a short time, there was a large reading public, but few books.

California was isolated and to obtain a book from a New York dealer often took months. The ways in which enterprising readers and book dealers met this demand produced a book boom unique in nineteenth century American, according to Mr. Hurley.

It is a known fact that many of the pioneers packed books in the prairie wagons as a diversion on the westward trek. However, many of these books were left along the way when space was valuable for other objects or the load had to be lightened.

Of course, there had been libraries in California before the Gold Rush, but those were in the Missions or in the possession of well-to-do families and, were mostly printed in Spanish and purchased in Mexico. The subject matter was also generally not of interest to the Yankees.

Research tells us that Dana found some good books in San Diego in 1835; and some of the 166 volumes of Harper's Family Library sold during 1847 by Sam Brannan in San Francisco probably ended up in some miner's tent.

Readers managed to get books even before shops were opened and secondhand books were traded from reader to reader. The libraries of the ships abandoned in the harbors were also sold. In 1849, the Pacific News mentioned an unclaimed packing case, valuable

because it contained some books. That same year, The Daily Alta advertised:

"Books! Books! For sale at this office – a choice assortment of beautiful bound American books; comprising souvenirs, gifts, clasp Bibles, historical, moral and religious works and a variety of reading adapted to the capacity of youth."

By December 1849, Wilson and Spaulding, apparently the earliest book store in San Francisco, opened for business, advertising thusly: "We know of no place where an idle half hour, if such a thing is possible in California, can be spent more agreeably than in the midst of our shelves."

Early in the Gold Rush a "family library" was offered for sale along with wheelbarrows and barrels of beans, while "1500 volumes" were advertised with Mexican playing cards, accordions, paintings, and window shades. Later, a job-lot of novels was listed for auction along with some of Lola Montez' diamonds, and a cartload of pure Havana cigars shared the block with 200 copies of Vol. 2 of Thomas Hart Benton's "Thirty Year View." The contents either did not appeal to the western reader or the publishers dumped remainders on the California market.

Price did not seem to be the question in California, it was the desire for reading that mattered. Lavishly bound books were sold along with paper covered volumes. In 1850, for instance, according to "Reading in the Gold Rush," a San Francisco dealer confidently advertised a two-volume set of Macaulay priced at \$32.00.

In the early 1850s Californians singled out books which dealt with the State's history or geographical position, and they read about Spain, Mexico, Nicaragua's proposed interoceanic canal, and the Sandwich Islands, with books about California taking the lead, according to the advertisements. Two travel accounts, Bayard Taylor's "El Dorado" and Alonzo Delano's "Across the Plains," were advertised and received reviews in the city papers. A San Francisco newspaper reporter of the Gold Rush days described the yellow backed novels he found in a miner's cabin, as books soiled and dog-eared, giving evidence that they are not allowed to go unread.

Subscription libraries were established in the middle of the Gold Rush decade, and they too, catered to the pioneer's taste for novels. The largest of them was the Mercantile Library in San Francisco. By 1857 that library

was ordering two copies of all new novels. Harper's Monthly had more subscribers in California per capita than in any other state.