

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

January 31, 1952

### **A Prank On Old Ames**

The second press of historic importance in California and no less important than the old Ramage or Zamorano press of Monterey, is now resting peacefully in the museum at Dearborn, Michigan, where Henry Ford gathered his great collection of American machinery from all over the United States. It is an old Hoe Press, cleaned and refurbished, and looking upon it one rejoices that it escaped the fate of Zamorano's press of the days when Monterey was an important port on the west coast.

This press was known as the "Old Ames" because it was brought to California by "an eccentric character known as Judge John Judson Ames". Of it an admirer wrote many years ago: "Of its class it is and ever was a superior piece of machinery, never seriously out of repair, always ready for duty and reliable – a veritable old civilizer and historian, telling its story from day to day, and not ready to sum up, perhaps for a century to come." (The Pioneer Press of California)

It has been written that this press was bought in New York in 1848, taken to Baton Rouge, the home of Zachary Taylor, where it was further said, Ames printed on it "The Dime Catcher," a Whig organ puffing Taylor for the Presidency.

About 1850 Ames decided to journey to California and to bring the press with him. He once saved it from a watery grave in the Chagres river as he crossed the Isthmus in a native canoe. At Gorgona it was taken apart, history relates, and loaded on the back of several mules. Ames paused in Panama while waiting transportation to California, and there printed The Panama Herald, the only newspaper for the many Argonauts also enroute to the "Land of Gold."

Upon arrival in California the wouldbe publisher went directly to Sacramento and there became associated with The Placer Times and Transcript.

He soon became interested in San Diego which he thought was soon to become the west coast terminal of the Pacific Railroad. There he established the town's first newspaper, The San Diego Herald, publishing the first edition on May 29, 1851. It was a Democratic paper. Ames wrote the articles, set the type, pulled the proofs and delivered the papers. Most of his advertising

came from San Francisco, so one day he sailed off for the city by the Golden Gate and left the press in the hands of Lieutenant George Horatio Derby of the United States Army Engineers.

As we have already related in the Diary in the past, Lieutenant Derby was stationed at the Monterey Presidio, played in the first plays at California's First Theatre, did much of the early surveying of lots in the City of Monterey, and started his writing career here in Monterey, before 1850.

Our informant relates that scarcely had Ames waved goodbye and sailed for San Francisco, than Derby, one of the most lovable players of pranks in the world and an author of ability, rolled up his sleeves and went to work. Under the nom-de-plume of 'John Phoenix' this officer had already earned considerable fame as a humorist; and he now proceeded in the most solemn manner, to overturn the solid basis of political goodwill so carefully and laboriously built up by his friend Ames. The very next issue of The Herald appeared as a full-fledged Whig paper. For nearly two months, John Phoenix played his pranks to the vast enjoyment of the knowing and to the rage of the good Democrats.

Ames, hearing of the disaster in far-off San Francisco, hurried south to try to repair the damages. He could see a joke and he turned the disaster to his own profit. He collected the contributions of John Phoenix into an inimitable book, "Phoenixiana," traveling all the way to New York to supervise its publication. Our author declares that in that book was born a new era in American humor and from Derby sprang Mark Twain, whose biting irony followed in a way made plain by John Phoenix."

Things did not go too well in San Diego, so in 1860 Ames packed up, old press, type and all, and journeyed to San Bernardino, which had been settled by Mormons in the early '50s. Here he started The San Bernardino Herald, a staunch Union sheet. In 1861 the press was taken over by one "Major" Edwin A. Sherman and renamed The Patriot, devoted to Abraham Lincoln. In March of 1862, he again packed the press, type and all else behind a team of oxen and hauled it through the Mojave Desert and Owens Valley to the town of Aurora where on May 24<sup>th</sup> he printed the first issue of The Esmeralda Star.

In 1870 the press went to the ownership of Pleasant Arthur Chalfant who hauled it to Fort Independence in Owens Valley to print The Inyo Independent. There it

was sent to collect dust until it went to Dearborn to rest  
in peace.

(More on Friday)