

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Press That Told The Story of the Gold Rush

The third of the historic printing presses so closely connected with early California was the one brought around the Horn by Sam Brannan to San Francisco in 1846. The trip was made aboard the "Brooklyn" and ended in the City by the Golden Gate, then known as Yerba Buena.

Brannan was a Mormon and was still in his early twenties when he was made an elder in the Mormon church by Brigham Young, the new head of the church and told to proceed by water to the promised land.

Brannan was a printer by trade. Before he left New York he had the heading cut for the California Star. He possessed a sturdy press, much on the same order as the Ames press which we discussed in yesterday's Diary, and plenty of type. He also had collected a two-years supply of paper, all of which was loaded on shipboard.

Brannan and his equipment landed in San Francisco on July 31st, 1846, only three weeks after Sloat had landed at Monterey and taken California for the United States. This act may have saved California from becoming a Mormon state, which, it is said, was Brannan's secret hope.

Upon landing Brannan immediately set up his press, did a few odd printing jobs for the authorities and then printed a small balance sheet on October 24, 1846, of which the editor of "Pioneer Presses of California" related there is not a single issue known to exist. On January 9, 1847 the first issue of The California Star came off the press.

The Star was a small, three column affair, carrying news from Mexico which was at least two months old, some civic news and some complaints.

It was one year after The Star began publication that Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's mill. The editor of The Star Kemble, by name, did not at once believe the news, but Alcalde Colton in Monterey told the story in the Californian. We will repeat that story here:

"Monday, May 29, 1848. Our town was startled out of its quiet dreams today by the announcement that gold had been discovered on the American Fork. The men wondered and talked, and the women too, but neither believed. The sibyls were less skeptical, they said the

moon had for several nights, appeared not more than a cable's length from the earth, that a white raven had been seen playing with an infant, and that an owl had rung the church bells". Then followed several stories for several days, until at last the populations started moving.

Brannan learned of The Californian's first announcement made in Monterey of the gold discovery. He then planned a spectacular piece of advertising in The Star. On April 1, 1848 two thousand copies of a special edition were printed for distribution in the "states", while Brannan arranged for an "express" to rush the copies across the continent. This article was the basis for the first publication of the gold discovery in The New York Herald on August 19, 1849.

[CORRECTION: August 19, 1848] Thus it is due to The Star and its old press which had come around the horn from New York to San Francisco, that the first news of the great discovery was brought to the attention of the outside world.

On June 14, 1848, Kemble locked the door of the printing shop in San Francisco and hastened to the gold country. He remained away until September. On the 18th of November he began publication of the combined Star and Californian. He had paid Brannan \$800 for the equipment, including the old press.

A month later there was another change when The Alta Californian came into existence. Edward Gilbert suggested the name and became one of the publishers. He had come to California with Stevenson's regiment of New York Volunteers. He was later a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1849 held in Monterey, was California's first congressman, and was killed by General James W. Denver in a duel near Sacramento in 1852.

The old press then went to Sacramento and was soon laid aside and forgotten. In 1859 Sam Brannan advertised for it, intending to present it to the Society of California Pioneers. It is possible that it was lost in a fire which destroyed the Sacramento Journal in 1852, as none of the answers to Brannan's ad were satisfactory.

According to George H. Himes, a veteran printer of the northwest, one Thomas J. Dryer bought The Star press from the publishers of The Alta in 1850 and carried it off to Oregon, where he printed on it The Portland Oregonian. Two years later it was again sold to The Columbian at Olympia and then to The Overland Press,

and then in 1863 J.R. Watson took it to Seattle to print The Intelligencer.

This press found rest at the University of Washington, where its achievements have found recognition. Saved thus from the fate of the old Monterey Press it is a precious link with an earlier day, but whether it is the Sam Brannan instrument still remains undetermined.

There is still another old press which is termed by many to be the San Brannan press. It rests as an exhibit in the Sutter Fort Historical Museum at Sacramento. In an issue of the Book Club of California "Quarterly News Letter," Carroll D. Hall, former curator of the Museum, writes that he is convinced that the Brannan Press is preserved at the Fort.