

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Gallant Galaxy of Heroes

The Society of California Pioneers contributed more than its share of Civil War Heroes and volunteers equally zealous but less famed," so Willard B. Farwell reported with pride in 1862 when he spoke of the society's generals. "Out of our own ranks from our own association we have given the nation Halleck, Hooker, Stoneman, Sherman, Naglee, Ord and others, heroes one and all ... what society, what city, what state, what section has contributed so gallant a galaxy of heroes as these, our brother pioneers?"

The occasion for Farwell's speech was the cornerstone laying of Pioneer Hall, the first home of its own that the society achieved, built upon the lot presented by James Lick, for whom Lick Observatory was named. Lick was also the donor of the latter institution to the University of California and he is buried beneath the large telescope. Previous to moving into the new home the Pioneers had long occupied clubrooms over the Bella Union music hall, an establishment of questionable reputation in San Francisco.

At the banquet which followed the laying of the cornerstone, Rev. David Starr King, a Californian since 1860 responded to a toast offered by State Assemblyman Owen P. Sutton, president of the society. A statue of David Starr King, given by the State of California, stands in the Hall of Fame in the capitol building in Washington, D.C.

Shortly after 1866, someone in the society started keeping a record of relics in possession of the Pioneers, in a large and handsome leather-bound book, and it is apparent that the pioneers were in possession of a large collection of objects, more of them valuable than not. For every bottle of earth from the South African diamond mines, there was a score of interesting and pertinent objects relating to the Pioneer's primary field of interest according to the author of "This Sudden Empire."

Sutter gave a brass cannon cast in St. Petersburg which had been taken to Sutter's Fort from Fort Ross, and which was used by General Stockton in 1846 in his advances from San Pedro to Los Angeles. For many years that cannon stood on the Montgomery street sidewalk in front of Pioneer Hall.

There was a painting of Father Junipero Serra made by Don Cristobal Diaz on the day in 1770 that the Mission San Carlos de Borromeo was completed. Sam Brannan gave a piece of the gunwale of the famous ship "Brooklyn" that had brought him to California in 1846. The battle flag of the California regiment in the War of the Rebellion and Father Font's map of the voyage to the California coast – all these and many similar objects came into the possession of the society.

In 1870 the library of the Society of California Pioneers contained 1,375 volumes, exclusive of periodicals and manuscripts. Twice during the sixties appropriations had been made for the purchase of books on California and the Pacific Coast.

Several writers and poets well known to early Monterey, presented their writings at the annual Admission Day programs during the fifties, including Charles Warren Stoddard, Daniel O'Connell and others. One of Daniel O'Connell's poems appears on the monument in front of Colton Hall, and Stoddard's grave in the Monterey Catholic Cemetery,

In 1874 the society published as an addendum to the Admission Day proceedings, the "List of Passenger Arrivals at the Port of San Francisco, for the Year 1849." It was based upon the original records in the possession of the Pioneers, augmented by material gathered from the early newspaper files, according to the records of the society preserved at present. This publication was the society's first, based on data on California history for its own sake, unrelated to any event of the moment.

June of 1870 brought the centennial of the first settlement of Monterey, and the society was invited to the celebration. "A large and enthusiastic group responded by making the junket southward to the old capitol," wrote our historian

In that same year, the society celebrated its twentieth anniversary with that of the state and plans for the observance were begun early in August. General William Tecumseh Sherman, the Pioneers' ex-treasurer, came. A committee of five members met him at Niles Station as he neared the city on September 7, and most of the remainder of the members marched down to the Oakland ferry wharf with a brass band to welcome their hero.

After he returned to Washington, Sherman wrote a letter to the society thanking them for their welcome to

him and recalling the early days when all kinds of men from every state in the Union swarmed into California.

“Who inquired if they came from New York, or Ohio or Alabama, or Texas?” he wrote. “Nobody. All were welcome. All were freemen.... If all our countrymen had seen California in those early pioneer days, I think we should not have seen a civil war.”