

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Pistol-Point Prestige

In the same year that the byline of Mark Twain appeared in the column of the Virginia City (Nevada) Enterprise, the paper imported the first steam-operated printing press ever seen in Nevada. The editors wrote, "The occasion of the first press run in steam was characterized by some confusion. To celebrate the novelty, wine was circulated in the press rooms and this, combined with the unfamiliarity of the machinery, occasioned a considerable delay in its appearance on the streets of Virginia City and Twain was compelled to take a brief absence from his editorial duties."

The affairs of the Daily Territorial Enterprise shared the ups and downs of a mining boom town, prospering as the mines operated in bonanza times and declining as the mines failed. The paper's first dispatch from the east, then on the verge of a civil war, were transmitted by the Pony Express when that classic service was briefly maintained between St. Joseph and San Francisco. Bulletins of extreme urgency, such as the firing on Fort Sumter, were first posted on Wells Fargo's notice board in C Street and later appeared in amplified form in the Enterprise columns.

Lucius Beebe, the editor of the Enterprise, writes: "In the time when American journalism was highly personal and editors and reports were expected to back up their expressions of opinion in personal encounter if necessary, the prestige of the Enterprise was often maintained at pistol point when dissatisfied readers sought to intimidate members of the staff."

One of the most bitter of the Comstock feuds which characterized the early days of the Mother Lode, was that between Jose Goodman of the Enterprise and Tom Fitch, proprietor of the Virginia Daily Union. Fitch had remarked in print that the logic of the Enterprise was "like the love of God" with the implication that "it surpasseth all human understanding." Goodman at once challenged Fitch and a duel with pistols was arranged. Coached in marksmanship by his second, Major Ferrand, Goodman was untouched when Fitch fired first, but his return fire struck Fitch in the knee and he was crippled for life. The duelists were later reconciled and the Enterprise supported Fitch when he ran successfully for Congress in 1869.

Throughout its long life the Virginia City Enterprise had many distinguished editors including Fred Harte, the brother of Bret Harte; Sam Davis, later editor of the Carson City Appeal, and brother of the old New York Sun's much-traveled Bob Davis. Next in notoriety to Mark Twain, probably the most famous of the Enterprise's editorial staff, was William Wright, its mining editor, who was known throughout the old West as "Dan De Quille." Wright was a trusted intimate of the Bonanza Kings of the Comstock – John McKay, Jim Flood, William O'Brien and Jim Fair. However, though he enjoyed the favor of the mighty in a time when enormous fortunes in speculative stocks were realized by those who were in the inside, Wright never profited from his acquaintances and died in modest circumstances. His story of the Comstock Lode, "The Big Bonanza," is an established classic of Western Americana.

Virginia City at one time boasted two German language papers, the Nevada Staats Zeitung, and the Deutsche Union. There was a theatrical weekly, The Footlight, and a literary and book review periodical, The Occidental.

When the Enterprise prepared to give up the ghost in 1893, the editor simply wrote: "For sufficient reasons we stop." The Society of Pacific Coast Pioneers in San Francisco flew its flag at half mast and the entire West mourned the passing of one of its most colorful institutions.

But the name and prestige of the Enterprise were too valuable assets to be allowed to lapse for long, and within a year the papers were again on the streets of Virginia City and elsewhere. From then until 1916 the paper was in continuous publication, although its editors no longer carried home the profits on Saturday night in water buckets filled with gold.