

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 26, 1952

Author of 'Seventh Heaven' Was Grandson of R.L.S.

From across the continent we are writing today of Monterey. In a Boston paper there appeared a few days ago the notice of the death of Austin Strong, playwright, at his summer home in Nantucket, Mass. This famous man, the author of "Seventh Heaven" and other popular productions was the son of Isabel Field, formerly of Monterey and now a resident of Santa Barbara, and the grandson of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson.

A few years ago Mrs. Field, with the cooperation of her son, presented to the Stevenson House in Monterey a number of pieces of furniture, first editions of Stevenson's writings, many pictures of the Stevenson family which also included Mrs. Field and her son Austin Strong, along with mementoes of the family's life abroad, in the United States and in Samoa. This collection of Stevensoniana is of great interest to historians and tourists who visit the Monterey Peninsula and the Stevenson House.

Austin Strong, who was 71 years old at the time of his death, wrote in addition to "Seventh Heaven," his first big success, "Three Wise Fools," which was produced by John Golden in New York in 1918. "Seventh Heaven" ran 704 performances on Broadway in the early 1920's. During his days in the theater Strong's name was associated with many of the great names of the stage.

A critic wrote: "Few modern plays have had the appeal of 'Seventh Heaven' whose hero 'Chico' had a great ambition – to get out of the sewers of Paris and become a street cleaner. Diane, his beloved, was played by Helen Menken when the play was produced in New York in 1922, and Chico by George Gaul." The play was later made into a silent movie in 1927 and starred Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. The talking picture was produced 10 years later with Simone Simone and James Stewart in the leads.

Mary Pickford's last appearance on the legitimate stage in 1913 was in Strong's "A Good Little Devil," a fantasy adapted from the French of Rosemonde Gerald and Maurice Rostand. His first play, "The Exile," was produced at the Royal Theater in London. Mr. Strong was also associated with Charles Frohman in New York in his younger life. J.M. Barrie was his friend and his

"Drums of Oude" was produced with two Barrie playettes.

Among other plays written by Austin Strong were: A version of "Rip Van Winkle" in 1911, "Bunny," in 1916, and "A Play Without a Name" in 1928.

As a boy, Strong lived with his mother in the home of Robert Louis Stevenson, who married his grandmother, Fanny Osborne. Most of his boyhood was spent in Honolulu and Samoa, with visits to Australia and the United States. After that time he spent most of his life in New York.

Strong's great-aunt was Mrs. Nellie Van Der Grift Sanchez, a sister of Mrs. Stevenson. She met and married Adolph Sanchez, a saloon keeper of Monterey, during the time Stevenson was in Monterey. Mrs. Stevenson, then Mrs. Osborne and her daughter Isabel (now Mrs. Field) resided in the Sherman Rose adobe which was then the Alvarado street residence of Miss Bonifacio, but is now the First National Bank site. Her book "Indian Place Names in California" is now a collector's item.

Austin Strong's father was Joe Strong, an early California artist who was a friend of Stevenson, Jules Tavernier and other writers and artists of the middle 1800's who lived or frequently visited in Monterey.

Monterey, the History and Art association, the State Park Commission and the Stevenson House are most grateful to Mr. Strong and to his mother for their generous contributions of their prized collection of Stevensoniana for the Stevenson House.