

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 3, 1952

Lavish Rewards for Poet In 1850

"Attention Pioneers!" is the fifteenth in an annual series of keepsakes issued by the Book Club of California to its members. Strikingly featured in this series are facsimile reproductions of 12 rare old California broadsides (posters) with explanatory comments by various authorities. Edited by Oscar Lewis and printed at San Francisco's Greenwood Press under the direction of Jack Werner Stauffacher. "Attention, Pioneers!" is an outstanding addition to the series.

Among the reproductions it "San Francisco's First Admission Day," and ode composed by Mrs. Elizabeth Maria Booney Wills and first sung at Portsmouth Plaza on Oct. 29, 1850. The ode printed on pale blue paper, consists of three long stanzas. In his introductory note, Mr. Lewis explains that when, some five weeks after California was admitted to the Union, the steamer Oregon brought the news to San Francisco, and the citizens of the city were not ones to allow an event so important to pass un-regarded. Preparation at once got underway for a city wide a celebration, which was held on October 29, 1850. Its chief feature was a parade, which the newspapers of the day pronounced by far the longest and most elaborate in the city's history. Virtually every phase of the community life was represented in the mile-long procession: continents of soldiers, sailors and marines, brass bands, volunteer fire companies, drum corps, marching teams and city and state dignitaries. Occupying an honored place among the horse drawn floats was one bearing a pretty girl dressed in flowing white robes and seated on a flower-decked throne. She was the first of what was destined to be a long line of Miss Californias

Mrs. Wills, composer of the ode, was a young woman of varied talents. She had arrived in California the year before as a correspondent for The Delta, a New Orleans newspaper. She married W.H. Parker, a local hotel keeper in 1850, and the following years founded a Seminary for Young Ladies on Powell street. Later, according to Lewis, she was wed a third time to an Englishman named Henry C. Walton. Her connection with various San Francisco private schools continued until she died in 1892.

That the contribution of this enterprising poetess to California's first Admission Day was not lightly regarded by the citizenry is evident from the gifts heaped on her at the grand ball held October 28. A "silver wreath of grapes and wheat" was laid on her head and a "beautiful and chaste gold medal, presented by the Council of the City" was suspended from her necklace. On her arm was placed a splendid bracelet of California gold set with diamonds, pearls, emeralds and rubies, also a gift of the Council. Surely a poetess has seldom been so lavishly rewarded, but there is evidence, writes Mr. Lewis and Mrs. Wills bore her honors with dignity, for the Alta's account of the presentation ceremony ends with this comment "She excited much admiration, which she received as one who was by no means overwhelmed by it."

It is interesting to know that this jewel-incrusted bracelet is now the prized possession of the California Historical Society, a gift of Mrs. Will's daughter. Engraved on its inner side in flowing, old-fashioned script is this inscription: "Presented to Mrs. E. M. Wills by the citizens of San Francisco as a token of gratitude for her ode in honor of the admission of California to the Union."