

March 30, 1953

A New Metropolis

The Book Club of California has offered its members during the past two years facsimile reproduction of 12 rare California broadsides, or posters, with explanatory comments by various authorities. The series is appropriately called "Attention, Pioneers!"

Number 11 in the series is "Birth of a Metropolis?" announcing the founding of a new supply center for the northern mines. The entire series of 15 of the keepsakes is edited by Oscar Lewis and its 12 parts are designed, and printed, by Jack Werner Stauffacher at the Greenwood Press, San Francisco. The original of the Nicolaus broadcast, about which we will write today, is owned by the Huntington Library, San Marion California.

Dr. George P Hammond, director of the Bancroft Library of the University of California, has written the explanatory comment for the Nicolaus broadside, which he begins with a note on the past and present day operators of land sales: "Promotion of real estate schemes has ever been dear to the American heart. California which is less than 100 years has grown from a rustic province of 50,000 inhabitants to a cosmopolitan state of more than 10,000,000, has often given free rein to this gambling spirit".

During 1848 and 1849, we know that men sought gold dust above all else, but that frantic search for the precious stuff led to other pursuits. Town sites that promised good harbors and shipping facilities were in special demand. The southern mines were cared for by the town of Stockton and other stations, but there was great competition for the traffic of the north. Merchants sought eagerly for landing places, wharves, and warehouses, where they could store their merchandise till it could be transported by ox and pack train to the mountains.

Dr. Hammond goes on to relate that good town sites on the Sacramento and Feather rivers were few, but as mines were discovered farther and farther north, the need for river transport became greater. Above Sacramento, the town of Vernon, started in 1849, had a

brief day of glory. Situated on the east bank of the Sacramento at its confluence with the Feather, it was for a time considered head of the navigation on that steam and grew with amazing speed. Indeed, Editor E.C. Kemble issued its first newspaper, "The Placer Times," on April 28, 1849.

A few miles beyond Vernon up the Feather River lived Nicolaus Altgeier, or Allgeler, a German friend of Sutter, who ran a ferry across the river as a convenience to his patrons in transporting good from New Helvetia to Hock Farm. Altgeier had lived here in a miserable state, in a hut since 1842, and had received several hundred acres, known as Nicolaus Ranch, in satisfaction of the labor he had performed for his friends, the early records of the transaction relate. In 1848 the spot, now called Nicolaus, assumed new importance as a supply point for the insatiable maw of mines. The humble Altgeier, as eager for profit and prominence as his contemporaries, joined in the common boom, laid out a town site and advertised lots.

Now back to Dr. Hammond's comment: "A lucky man might doubt his money in a few weeks or months at this game, where values rose and fell with feverish suddenness. If there was any doubt that boats could not safely reach the spot. Altgeier's sales agents did their best to dispel such fears as their broadside reveals. To judge by their claims, Nicolaus was destined to become a great commercial entrepot. But fortune, proverbially fickle, soon left both Nicolaus and Vernon behind. As the mines swept northward, Yubaville, now changing to the more euphonious Marysville, became the depot of the northern mining region, and the towns lower down the river lapsed into their present obscurity. By 1900, Nicolaus township had no more than 1,000 inhabitants, and by 1950 only about 2,000.

The broadside advertising lots in Nicolaus, of which there are only two known copies, one in Bancroft and one in Huntington, is another bit of evidence of the short-lived glory enjoyed by some of the boom towns of the Gold Rush.

The broadside ends with these lines printed on green paper in black ink: "To the Merchant, the Speculator, the Trader, the Mechanic and the Miner, we unhesitatingly assert that Nicolaus presents greater advantages than any other place in California. We offer the unsold lots at original prices, and invite all who are

desirous of securing comfortable homes, or acquiring rapid fortunes, to visit the Town, judge for themselves, and make their investments before the most eligible of the unsold lots are disposed of.”