

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Contribution to Aviation

The Book Club of California has done an excellent job in the publication of a Keepsake Series for the members, entitled "Attention Pioneers!", of which there are 15 in all.

The Book Club is a non-profit association of book-lovers, and collectors, who have a special interest in Pacific Coast history, literature, and fine printing. It was founded in 1912 with its chief aims to further the interest of book collectors in the West, and to promote an understanding, and appreciation of fine books.

The ninth broadside in the series of "Attention, Pioneers!" is "The Flight of the Avitor, San Franciscans of 1869 view airship that really flies." The original of the broadside is in the collection of John Howell of San Francisco. Walter J. Held wrote the explanatory comment for number nine.

This broadside probably used for outdoor advertising is smaller than those in most of the series. It is 7 by 15 inches, printed in large black type on peach colored paper. It was published in July, 1869, by Francis and Valentine, 517 Clay St., San Francisco.

The "One Open Air Exhibition, of What is Really the Eighth Wonder of the World," was to take place at the Recreation Grounds on Sunday, Aug. 1, 1869. The ascension of the Avitor was to take place at two o'clock precisely and continue until four. The broadside also advertised that this would be the last opportunity to witness this truly wonderful invention, as the machine would, after Sunday, be taken to San Mateo; previous to the construction of the New Avitor, 120 feet in length.

The Aerial Steam Navigation Company most respectfully informed their numerous friends, and the public, that they had secured the above magnificent suburban resort for the purpose of giving one open-air exhibition of what is really the Eighth Wonder of the World.

Walter J. Held, whose comments are contained in the folder which encircles each broadside, has revealed through research that Frederick Marriott was the support of this exhibition in 1869.

Marriott, erstwhile seeker of gold, who turned successfully to commerce and in 1856 began publishing

the San Francisco News-Letter, had earlier in England studied the possibilities of human flight. As his affluence grew he turned to experimenting with a flying machine.

This was in the late 60's and to him goes credit for probably the first craft actually to fly in California. And one can say that California's contribution to aviation, though highlighted with embitterment, comprises a vital part of this country's record of getting man into the air, writes Held.

We find that the Avitor, as Marriott named his invention, was a lighter-than-air craft, actually a balloon with small cloth wings, a rudder, and a tiny steam-generating plant for revolving two propellers. The gas-filled bag, shaped like a cigar, was 37 feet long, and at its middle was 11 feet high and 8 feet wide. The lower part was encased in a rigid wooden and wicker frame.

It is believed that the Avitor was built in a large building at Shell Mound, on the bay near Emeryville, acquired by Marriott. The initial flight was indoors at the plant. This was on July 2, 1869, according to the record. The balloon was inflated, steam raised in the boiler, and the two, four foot, propellers began to whirl. Then before a breathless audience the flying machine rose several feet from the floor, and rapidly moved forward as it was guided by lines attached fore and aft. The rudder, shaped like a child's pin dart, was manipulated and the craft smoothly ascended to the ceiling. The witnesses were almost hysterical, so the reporters of the day related, and one optimistic onlooker later wrote that the whole problem of flying was achieved. He even declared: "that the first packet of a regular line of aerial steamships will start from California for New York within a few weeks."

The broadside, gotten out by the Book Club for its members, probably refers to the subsequent open-air flight which is known to have taken place. Before an interested crowd the Avitor was made ready. The rudder was set to turn the flying machine in a circle. Then the craft gracefully took to the air, the reporters announced, with lines attached at both ends. It gathered speed until it was doing five miles an hour. The vehicle circled the field twice, and in every way performed perfectly. The spectators, no doubt, went home convinced that the flying age had indeed arrived, wrote Held in the explanatory comment.

Later, Held tells his readers, the Avitor did not fare so well. In fact, Marriott soon realized bitterly that his

flying machine would never survive the elements. So he abandoned the whole project. It was an amateur's contraption: Marriott had spent 13 years of study and experiment. History gives him little or no place in the story of the beginning of aviation. Yet, in California, more than 83 years ago, he built a flying machine that actually flew.