

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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'Ten Commandments' Gold Rush Days

The 1953 of Keepsakes from the Book Club of California to its members, is to be a delightful bit of pictorial humor of the Gold Rush. Carl I. Wheat is the chairman of the Keepsakes committee and has edited the series. The printing of the 12 folders and the comments by various authorities, is being designed and printed by the Grabhorn Press in San Francisco—all of which makes them collectors' items.

Mr. Wheat comments that the committee in selecting this pictorial humor, "has not overlooked the fact that many apparently laugh-provoking quips of those earlier days fall a bit flat after the passage of a century. There was a certain artificiality—often considerable cruelty—in much mid-nineteenth century humor."

We learn from the four folders just received that numerous symbols (like "the elephant") around which much of the Gold Rush humor developed, Mr. Wheat remarks, have lost most or all of their erstwhile connotation and he believed that even the pioneering efforts of the inimitable Lt. Derby (John Phoenix) possess today only historic interest.

This first group of four in the Keepsakes series is composed of three "lettersheets," originating in California and a cartoon published in New York for departing gold seekers.

No. 1 is a copy of the "Miner's Ten Commandments" written by James M. Hutchings. These commandments first appeared in the Placerville Herald of June 4, 1853, without illustrations. Caroline Wenzel, who wrote the comment for the Commandments, relates that the illustration accompanying Part 1 has been reproduced in facsimile from the original in the collection of the Columbia Park Museum.

It is interesting to note that Hutchings had agreed to get out an issue of the paper while the editor was away, and he included in that issue the "Commandments," which he had recently written during a Sunday-closing agitation. According to the paper of that day, the issue had hardly appeared on the Placerville streets (then known as "Hangtown"), before there was a clamor for extra copies, and the edition was soon sold out.

Through further research the commentator has found that later the same year the Commandments appeared in the papers of Nevada City and in the Columbia Gazette. Previous to this Hutchings had not signed his work, but now realizing that they had enough merit to be copied in rival papers, he acknowledged authorship and copyrighted them in December 1853.

Years later, in 1887, Hutchings reprinted the original "Commandments," reporting that no less than 97,000 copies had been sold.

Extensively used by miners for writing to the folks at home, many illustrated letterheads of this general character were preserved by their addressees and are still in existence. An original letter written by a young man residing at "Murphy's, Cal.," on July 10, 1854, to a cousin in the States, apologized for the stationery but expressed the thought that "perhaps it will give you a better idea of Cal life looking at those pictures than I could possibly do with a pen." That is the letter which is preserved at Columbia.

Today the most highly prized copies of the "Commandments" are the lettersheets copyrighted by Hutchings. The 1853 Placerville editions are preferred by collectors, according to Caroline Wenzel, through the San Francisco edition is also well regarded. All are rare and interesting mementos of California's boisterous coming of age, she writes.

A summary of The Ten Commandments should be of interest: "1—Thou shalt have no other claim than one; 2—Thou shalt not make unto thyself any false claim; 3—Thou shalt not go prospecting before thy claim give out; 4—Thou shalt not remember what thy friends do on the Sabbath Day; 5—Thou shalt not think more of thy gold and how thou canst make it fastest; 6—Thou shalt not kill thy body by working in the rain; 7—Thou shalt not grow discouraged; 8—Thou shalt not steal a pick; 9—Thou shalt not tell any false tales about "gold diggings in the mountains"; 10—Thou shalt not commit an unsuitable matrimony, nor covet "single blessedness."