

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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'Have You Seen The Elephant?'

"Have you seen the elephant?" Most gold-seekers who journeyed to California in '49 could fairly acknowledge that they had, whether they came via the Isthmus, or around the Horn, or across the plains and over the Rockies. The man on the street and the miner in the diggings knew well in those days the significance of the expression and saw no need to define it. What did they mean?

The above paragraph is the introduction to the comments for the second in the series of the Book Club of California's "Pictorial Humor of the Gold Rush." Edited by Carl I. Wheat. It was written by Nat Schmulowitz, explaining the first group of four Keepsakes, composed of three "lettersheets" originating in California. The original of the "elephant" is in the Collection of the California State Library. The fourth is a cartoon published in New York for departing gold seekers. The second group will consist of four foreign pictorial jests anent the gold fever.

Our editor tells us that, like many other popular sayings, the phrase "to see the elephant" seems to have had multiple meaning, depending on era and area. To one it signified that he had surmounted and successfully survived the hazards of his long journey. In other words, he had "see the elephant," and had reached the promised land. To another it meant that his mining claim had petered out and that he must "seek new diggings." (He, too had "seen the elephant.")

To a more fortunate few it doubtless suggested that they had found the gold they came to seek. They, too had "seen the elephant." And were heading home. To all of which Nat Schmulowitz adds this thought: "To a new arrival in the San Francisco community, a night in its mud-infested streets and brilliantly lighted gambling houses offered a particularly good sight of "the elephant."

The illustration accompanying Part Two of the Keepsake series shows an elephant, standing on his hind legs with his trunk in midair, before a small man carrying his miner's pick and shovel. It was printed by a firm in the Post Office building on Clay street in San Francisco but the name is not recognizable.

Beneath the drawing are the following questions and answers:

Miner, "Well how der du? Put down your trunk.

Your journey makes you pull

You've traveled hard, I like your spunk

Say! Have you been up the "Bluff"?

Elephant, "I reckon, yes—have you?"

Miner, "Yes Siree I've been there to"

Elephant, "What saw you there? No gold I swear!

To get from the sand, you can't"

Miner, "I saw one chap when you were there."

Elephant, "Who?"

Miner, "I saw the Elephant."

To John N. Kerr, who on March 2, 1857 wrote his letter on the lettersheet here depicted, it not only meant that he had "seen the elephant", but that the Gold Bluff excitement referred to was a hoax, perhaps of elephantine proportions.