

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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'Worth a Thousand Words'

The last in the series of four Keepsakes from the Book Club of California for this quarter, dealing with pictorial humor of the Gold Rush is "Off to California."

Although most Gold Rush cartoons were apparently both drawn and published in California, a number are known to have originated elsewhere, according to Jane Grabhorn, who wrote the comment for this number.

Of the New York examples of Gold Rush humor in cartoons, the most popular, and judging by their survival over a century seem to have been these of Henry R. Robinson, a well-known lithographer of the period. He had commenced his career as early as 1833 as a "woodcarver and gilder," but soon engaged in lithography, and in 1846 first turned his attention to California by depicting in caricature the dramatic departure of the "New York Volunteers" for Mexican service on Western Shores.

The cartoon enclosed in the folder, a reproduction of the original now in the Library of Congress, is entitled "One of the California Boys taking leave of his Gal." It was drawn by Edward W. Clay, then a leading graphic satirist, and was published by Robinson.

Harry T. Peters in the "California on Stone," reproduced this lithograph, as well as three others published by Robinson in 1849, at the height of the gold fever. One of these was the celebrated cartoon entitled "A Gold Hunter on His way to California via St. Louis," The Robinson version of which bears the added legend "I am sorry I did not follow the advice of granny to go round the Horn, through the Straits, or by Chagres."

This same, oddly equipped overdressed, and heavily laden gold seeker was depicted, with different background, by N. Courier and also by Kelloggs and Comstock, the title being "The Independent Gold Hunter on the Way to California," according to a footnote on the folder.

"Mose and Lize" on their way to and in California, as published by Robinson, were very popular. These individuals were leading characters in an "Original Extravaganza and Great Dramatic Hit." By one Barney Williams, entitled "Mose in California," according to a rare playbill preserved by the California Historical Society.

"Headed for a crowded steamer is a motley array of rascals, one running from his creditors, another forcibly breaking away from his panic-stricken wife, a third escaping from his landlady, and others engaged in various frantic efforts to board the vessel," is Mrs. Grabhorn's description of the cartoon. All in all, Henry Robinson seems to have cashed in quite successfully on the California gold fever, our commentator notes.

Carl I. Wheat, the editor of "Pictorial Humor of the Gold Rush series of the Book Club of California for 1953, has this to say in connection of the choice of subjects or Keepsakes: "There was a freshness, however, and a quality of uniqueness about the California Gold Rush. Never before had so many men traveled so far without their women or at such a great cost in human energy and suffering. When they arrived at the diggings they found life no picnic. Small wonder that their humor was often far from light-hearted, or light-handed. At a time when bloody bull-and-bear fights were the chief-drawing cards on the one day of rest the miners could afford, men guffawed, if at all, at those representations of themselves and their fellows which poked fun at their misery and daily travail. Yet it is from the cartoons of the period that we of a later century may find the truest understanding of those lusty days. Then, as ever, a "picture is worth a thousand words."