

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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'Gem of the Southern Mines'

An inspiring opportunity came to me last week when I was among those present at the conference of the California Historical Societies, sponsored by the California History Foundation of the College of the Pacific in Columbia Historic State Park. There were more than 100 interested persons registered, among them a number of qualified speakers and extra-qualified leaders, as well as those in the audience who asked and answered pertinent questions about the operation and maintenance of historical collections and museums. The planned program dealt with historical societies, historical markers, publications, research, presentation, and a tour of Columbia.

It may sound dry and boring to our readers, but that was not the case. It was humorous, inspiring, educational and most enjoyable and we do not hesitate to say that a great majority of those present wished that the discussion and program could have been extended for the second day.

Last Friday evening at 8 o'clock the entire delegation gathered in the garden of Dr. Robert Burns' home in Columbia. The evening was perfect with a full moon overhead and the weather not too warm. Dr. Burns, the president of the College of the Pacific, the sponsoring parent of the Foundation, has owned this old home in Columbia for a half dozen years or more. It is within the present boundaries of the State Park, purchased by the Division of Beaches and Parks and maintained by it as a Historical Monument. There is one other home within the confines of the park, owned by a dentist of Sonora. Both owners have agreed never to change the outside structure of their historic houses, so that they may also represent the Gold Rush period which Columbia is to represent in the State Park system.

At this first session, Dr. John Hussey, regional historian of the National Park Service, made the keynote talk on the place of the historical society in this modern life. Dr. Burns followed with an instructive and "luring" informal talk on the history of Columbia from the early Gold Rush period to the present day. Dr. Neasham then brought the audience to the present period when historic markers should be placed to honor the pioneers, places and events which have made California history.

To break the seriousness of the evening, Arthur Farey, public relations representative of the College of the Pacific, appeared from out of nowhere and gave Mark Twain's version of the "Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." The audience seemed to feel sure that it was delivered much better than even Twain had dreamed it could be, which was proven by the amount of applause he received. Dr. Burns was heard to say that by actual count he had heard Mr. Farey tell this famous story more than 200 times but as yet he had never been bored with the re-telling.

The town of Columbia, once called "The Gem of the Southern Mines," is one of the architectural showplaces of the Mother Lode country. That is the reason it was picked by the Division of Beaches and Parks for a historical monument to be forever preserved for future generations and historians to study and enjoy. The town was never abandoned; consequently the buildings never fell into complete disrepair; nor has it experienced the growth which led, in other towns, to false fronts and stucco covering. Almost all the permanent buildings are of brick, a reflection of the excellent brick-making clays available locally.