

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The 1848 Quarter Eagles

The Numismatist, the official publication of the American Numismatic (coin collector) Association, recently published an article concerning history in California in 1848 and a two and one-half dollar coin.

Richard S. Yeoman of Racine, Wis., wrote the article and read it at a convention of the Oklahoma-Kansas numismatists. The magazine in which the historic item appeared was presented to us by Zander Klawans of Monterey, who is a numismatist in his own right.

The author of "The 1848 Quarter Eagle with Cal." Wrote in part: "One day in the late autumn of 1948, I found myself idly turning one of my favorite coins over and over in my fingertips. It was a commemorative moment, for it was the 100th anniversary of the coin. I concentrated my attention, as I had done many times before, on the unique punched-in letters, "CAL.," on the reverse side just above the eagle.

"It came as a jolting fact that were it not for the far-seeing awareness of a California military governor, a secretary of war and a small band of subordinates, the first shipment of gold from the California discovery to reach the eastern seaboard would not have been perpetuated. Nor would it have been possible for the numismatic fraternity to possess a few hundred precious specimens of the 1848 quarter eagle with "CAL," to represent the biggest gold boom in the United States history."

Yeoman goes on to tell how he re-examined the coin and took delight in philosophizing on the subject of coins which commemorate special events but that the coin in his hand commemorated itself. The very fabric of the piece is the thing commemorated, and the three tiny letters constituted the hallmark of genuineness placed there through the influence of a group of officials who had extraordinary vision and a fine feeling for the historical significance of the event.

This numismatist found only meager bits of information in any books concerning his interesting coin, but he felt that there was a great deal more to be learned than the fact that this piece was struck from the first shipment received from the California goldfields. There were such questions in his mind as these: how much gold was shipped, where was the gold collected and by whom, by

what means did it reach the Atlantic Coast and how many coins were stamped with the distinguishing mark, "CAL."?

This is the real story of the coin and it concerns Monterey. They sat in Col. Richard B. Mason's headquarters of the 10th Military Department at Monterey on a sun-baked lazy August afternoon. The year was 1848. Mason, who was in command of the 1st Dragoons and military governor of California, faced two staff officers, Lt. W.T. Sherman and Lucien Loeser, who sat on the opposite side of the table.

"That box," Col. Mason was saying pointing significantly to the tea caddy placed conspicuously in the center of the table, "must be delivered to Gen Jones in Washington City before President Polk delivers his annual address to the Congress on December 5. As you already know, there are over 230 ounces of gold in the box, as well as samples of gold dust and flakes which Sherman and I picked up in the goldfields last month."

Mason paused and then resumed: "I am determined to furnish the War Office with undeniable proof that all the wild stories about the gold discovery are true!" He then glanced from one inquisitive face to the other, saying, "One of you fellows is going to be my courier, and I can't decide..."

Two years before they had been thrown together in Brooklyn where Mason had been superintendent of recruiting service, Sherman and Loeser served under him as recruiters for the Mexican campaign. Mason had enjoyed a fond interest in the young officers and when the time came for assignment of men as replacements at the Presidio of Monterey, he had recommended Sherman and Loeser among others for the transfer. He stood on the pier in the East River to bid them bon voyage when the U.S. Store Ship Lexington sailed July 14, 1846. The tedious voyage to Monterey around the Horn had taken 200 days. Col. Mason joined them the following March, arriving by sea from Callao in the Store Ship Erie.

When Gen. Kearney left Monterey at the end of May, Col. Mason was left in command. Mason then selected 1st Lt. Sherman as his adjutant and secretary. Loeser was promoted from 2nd to 1st Lieutenant. Now Mason must decide who was to carry the gold to the eastern seaboard. (To be Continued)