

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California's First Gold

Col. Richard B. Mason in command of the First Dragoons and military governor of California sat in the headquarters of the 10th Military Department at Monterey in 1848, faced with a problem – the choice between two lieutenants, Sherman and Loeser, to deliver a precious 230 ounces of California's first gold to Washington.

As the trio talked, Sherman looked at Loeser, and Mason glanced at Sherman. The tension was finally broken as each spoke soft and deliberately.

"It's a very simple choice, colonel. Loeser has only recently been promoted and deserves the chance to go home." As the colonel relaxed with ill-concealed relief, Sherman rose and continued, "I recommend, sir, that he be detailed to carry the news and the samples of gold." Each man, history tells us, thereupon rose and shook hands all around and accepted the decision as his own personal triumph.

When the matter of transportation for the messenger was brought up, Sherman reminded his superior that Capt. Folsom, who had brought in the gold dust in an oyster can that morning from San Francisco, was still in Monterey, and inasmuch as he was the government collector at the Custom House there, he might know the best way to make arrangements for the journey.

Sherman then became the ghost writer of one of the most important messages to reach the East before the gold rush, when he prepared a report to be delivered to Adj. Gen. Jones by Loeser.

In Gen. Sherman's memoirs he tells how he found it pleasant to stare out the small window in his Monterey headquarters. His view, he says, "was an inspiring one," for he gazed far out over the blue waters of the bay to the gently curving shore 20 miles away. Six or seven vessels lay at anchor in the bay. Off to the east he could see the high rocky ridge of Toro beyond which the Sierra de Gaviolon rose faintly above the Salinas plains. The scene was one of utter peace and beauty.

At length a schooner anchored at Monterey and Loeser was duly informed by Col. Mason that the vessel had been chartered for him and his appointed companions. It was the schooner La Lambaycana, bound for Peru, where Loeser was to meet the October sailing of an

English steamer for Panama. They sailed from Monterey Aug. 30 with a sample of California's first gold. Loeser arrived in Washington two days before President Polk's annual message was to be given. His report set off an explosion. The tea caddy was placed on display in the War Office for all to see.

The Secretary of War, W.L. Macy, then requested in a letter to Dr. R.M. Patterson, director of the U.S. Mint at Philadelphia, "If the metal is found to be pure gold, I request you to reserve enough of it to have two medals struck ordered by Congress and not yet completed, and the remainder, with the exception of one or two bars, I wish to have coined and sent with the bars to this department. As many may wish to procure specimens of coin made of California gold, by exchanging other coin for it, I would suggest that it be made into quarter eagles with a distinguishing mark on each..."

It was on Jan. 5, 1849 that the Director of the Mint sent Secretary of War Macy the notification he was expecting about the gold coins with this explanation: "Before the California gold could be used it had to undergo the process of parting in order to separate from it the excess of silver which it contains. This was one source of delay. Another occurred by the time required for stamping the letters "CAL" on the quarter-eagles as you desired."

Much of the information in this story of the "1848 Quarter Eagle with Cal." came from Richard S. Yeoman's paper printed in the Numismatist, Walter Colton's "Three Years in California", Sherman's memoirs, "Anybody's Gold" by Joseph Henry Jackson, "Eldorado" by Bayard Taylor, "California Heritage" by Oscar Lewis and other historical publications.