

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 24, 1954

### Christmas Present From RLS

Sixty-three years ago Robert Louis Stevenson heard of a little girl who had the misfortune to be born on Christmas Day – and so found two celebrations inextricably bound up as one. Very formally, with legal phases, a seal and two duly certified witnesses, he turned over his own birthday to her, to be enjoyed “in the customary manner.”

The recipient of this unusual gift was Miss Annie H. Ide, the younger daughter of the American Land Commissioner in Samoa, then at home in the states while her father associated with the famous author in the South Sea Islands. Ide later became Chief Justice for a term.

Stevenson wrote to Ide from Vailima on June 19, 1891: “Herewith please find the document, which I trust will prove sufficient in law. It seems to me very attractive in its eclecticism. Scots, English, and Roman law phases are all indifferently introduced, and a quotation from the works of Haynes Bailey can hardly fail to attract the indulgence of the Bench. – Yours very truly, Robert Louis Stevenson

That little girl on whom Stevenson bestowed this honor later became Mrs. W. Bourke Cockran of Washington, D.C. When he transferred his day to her in 1891, Stevenson insisted that it be duly celebrated or else – in a clause near the end – it would automatically go “to the President of the United States of America.” Ever after Mrs. Cockran obeyed the spirit as well as the letter of the deed: she protected her rights. On November 13 each year she always had a party of some kind as long as she lived. On two of the earliest ones she and Stevenson celebrated together.

The deed said: “I, Robert Louis Stevenson, Advocate of the Scots Bar, author of *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Moral Emblems*, stuck civil engineer, sole owner and patantee of the Palace and Plantation known as Vailima in the island of Upolu, Samoa, A British Subject, being in sound mind, and pretty well, I thank you, in body:

“In consideration that Miss Annie H. Ide, daughter of H.C. Ide in the town of Santa Johnsbury, in the county of Caledonia, in the State of Vermont, United States of America, was born, out of all reason, upon Christmas

Day, and is therefore out of all justice denied the consolation and profit of a proper birthday.

“And considering that I, the said Robert Louis Stevenson, have attained an age when O, we never mention it, and that I have now no further use for a birthday of any description;

“And in consideration that I have met H.C. Ide, the father of the said Annie H. Ide, and found him about as white a land commissioner as I require;

“Have transferred, and do hereby transfer, to the said Annie H. Ide, all and whole my rights and privileges in the thirteenth day of November, formerly my birthday, and, hereby, and henceforth, the birthday of the said Annie H. Ide, to have, hold and exercise and enjoy the same in the customary manner, by the sporting of fine raiment, eating of rich meats, and receipt of gifts, compliments and copies of verse, according to the manner of our ancestors;

“And I direct the said Annie H. Ide to add to the said name of Annie H. Ide the name Louisa, at least in private; and I charge her to use my said birthday with moderation and humanity, ‘et tamquam bona finia familia,’ and having carried me in a very satisfactory manner since I can remember.

“And in case the said Annie H. Ide shall neglect or contravene either of the above conditions, I hereby revoke the donation and transfer my rights in the said birthday to the President of the United States of America for the time being;

In witness thereof I have hereto set my hand and seal this nineteenth day of June in the year of grace eighteen hundred and ninety-one,”

Robert Louis Stevenson

Witness, Lloyd Osbourne

Witness Harold Watts

Stevenson answered Miss Ide’s letter of thanks in which she sent a photograph of herself and some drawings. In it he explained how the birthday would work – “you have thus become a month and 12 days younger than you were, but will go on growing older for the future in the regular and human manner from one thirteen of November to another.” He signed himself “your revered and delighted name-father.”

In the collection of Stevensoniana in the Stevenson House there is a beautiful framed picture of Annie Ide

Cockran and a framed copy of the original document written to her by the author. These were presented to the Stevenson House by Stevenson's stepdaughter, the late Mrs. Isobel Field.