

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Gold Rush Humor**

The last four in the series of "Pictorial Humor of the Gold Rush," published by the Book Club of California for its members, have arrived. They are edited by Carl I. Wheat, noted historian, and printed and designed by the Grabhorn Press of San Francisco. Comments on each of the humorous drawings are made by various authorities on the subject reproduced.

The Book Club secretary has announced that the 1954 series has for its theme "Early Western Transportation" which should be a fascinating subject and a pleasing and valuable collection for those interested in Californiana. Robert J. Woods, is serving as editor and the printing is in the capable hands of Grant Dahlstrom of the Castle Press, Pasadena.

There is a freshness and a quality of uniqueness about the California Gold Rush, writes Mr. Wheat in his introduction to the pictorial series. Never before had so many men traveled so far without their women or at such great cost in human energy and suffering. When they arrived at the diggings they found life no picnic. Small wonder then that their humor was often far from light-hearted.

No. 9 in the Pictorial Humor of the Gold Rush is a lithograph of two women discussing the events of the day, characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian folk, dreaming of adventures in California. The artist, Honore Daumier, contributed these cartoons twice a week to *Le Charivari*, a French paper.

Daumier was a French artist who found cartooning to his liking only because it was the means of a livelihood; his heart was then, 1848, devoted to oil painting, but the public of the day did not recognize his greatness and his invaluable contribution to this field. Louis de Guiringaud, consul general of France at San Francisco wrote in the foreword: "If today's authorities rank him among the foremost painters of the last century, he is still more widely known for his several thousand lithographs." The one chosen for reproduction in the series and which appeared in "*Le Charivari*" on Aug. 2, 1850, is not the only one inspired by the California Gold Rush. I know of another, in the same series "Actualities," and another called "Actionnaires Californiens."

Probably the inspiration for these drawings were the letters written from Monterey by Jacques Antoine Moerenhout, French consul at Monterey, to report to "Monsieur le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères" of the extraordinary events which he happened to witness. The dispatch from which these quotations are taken is dated Monterey, Aug. 17, 1848. Gold had been discovered on the American River, near Fort Sutter, in the latter part of January. For several months the discovery was kept as much of a secret as possible, so therefore it was not until spring that the rumor spread widely.

It was not until May the 15<sup>th</sup> that Moerenhout mentioned it for the first time to his superior in France. The letter containing the important news was probably written from the French consulate, now the Girl Scout house on El Estero, then a handsome adobe building on Fremont street, near Casa Munras.

Anxious to give his government an exact account of the event, the alert French consul left Monterey and went himself to the placers, only to come back so much interested and impressed that his report took no less than 118 pages in the copyist's neat hand. These letters have been published for the first time, and in English, by the California Historical Society: Jacques Antoine Moerenhout, "The Inside Story of the Gold Rush." It still remains the most objective account of the early days of the gold rush. Excerpts from it appeared in a "Description de la Nouvelle Californie: by Hypolite Ferry, a book published early in 1850.