

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Stevenson's Trail

It was through the interest and planning of the Literary Anniversary Club of San Francisco that the bronze plaque was placed on the wall at the front of the Stevenson House on Houston street in Monterey – the first official recognition the old two-story, white adobe building had had.

That event took place on Nov. 26, 1932, with Flodden W. Heron of the Literary Club presiding. Present at the small gathering were Mrs. Robin Clark and the late Mrs. Edith van Antwerp, who had purchased the house a few years before in order to save it from destruction.

Mr. Heron, whose death occurred a couple of years ago, was one of the organizers of the Literary Anniversary Club about the year 1930. He was "an insurance man who loved books and had one of the finest collections of Stevensoniana in existence, including one of the four portraits of the author," according to the records. On Nov. 12, 1950, Mr. Heron presented his entire collection to the Stevenson House and there it is today to be viewed, studied and enjoyed by all admirers of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Heron's generous gift was accepted by Joseph R. Knowland, chairman of the commission of the division of beaches and parks, on behalf of the State of California. The donor was then too ill to make the trip to Monterey as he had done in 1932. The Monterey History and Art Association were hosts for the event, which also observed the 100th anniversary of the birth of Stevenson.

We have inquired of the California Historical Society in San Francisco and have been informed by Mrs. Edna Martin Parrott, the director, that the Literary Club no longer functions – death having taken most of the active members who had kept the interest in the group alive. In the past the members were in the habit of celebrating important dates in literary history. For instance on July 4 they would get together to hear a paper in memory of that immortal boatribe when Lewis Carroll told the story of Alice in Wonderland to little Miss Alice Liddell. On May 16, they would celebrate the meeting of James Boswell and Dr. Samuel Johnson in Davies bookshop in London. Then on Nov. 13 they would journey to Portsmouth Square in San Francisco to

lay a wreath on the Stevenson Monument which was unveiled 46 years ago last October.

Mr. Heron never tired telling the story of the creation of the first sketches for this Stevenson memorial. Willis Polk and Bruce Porter, both well known on the Peninsula during their lifetime, drew the design on a tablecloth at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. The cloth itself was taken by the artists to the Bohemian Club, where it remained until the fire brought destruction to that building and its valuable contents.

It was some 75 years ago that Stevenson lived in San Francisco after his sojourn in Monterey. At that time in the 600 block on Bush street Mary Carson lived and rented furnished rooms in an old balconied cottage that had been brought around the Horn. And to her door came "a strange looking, shabby shack of a fellow, who wore a little brown ulster buttoned tight under his chin," as she described Stevenson in her later life.

"Scotch brogues laced high, with his pants stuck in their tops and a diver hat. He was tall and emaciated, and his dark brown hair fell untidily to his neck," she related. "But Irish Mary took him in and came to love him like her own child. His name was Robert Louis Stevenson but he was not yet famous, a sick man seeking health the world over."

Bush street is now greatly changed as is the Monterey that Stevenson knew. Mary Carson's gay laugh has long been stilled. Her youngest child who used to say "Dere's de author" whenever RLS entered the home, is also gone. But all that Stevenson saw between him and the bay is also gone, the restaurant where he dined for 50 cents is no more.

We might go further and wonder what Stevenson would think or recognize if he could return to Monterey today. From his room in the Stevenson house he could not now look across back lots and see El Cuartel, which was once the capitol building. Nor could he walk around the corner from the old adobe building on Houston street and visit and eat with Jules Simoneau. Where these buildings once stood the street called Tyler was cut through to Munras.