

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Opening of the Trail

The Friends of the Bancroft Library have made possible the publication by the Bancroft Library of the fascinating story of the Stevens party from the reminiscences of Moses Schallenberger, as set down for H.H. Bancroft about 1885, edited and expanded by Horace S. Foote in 1888, and now edited by George R. Stewart. The University of California Press has published this story under the title: "The Opening of the California Trail."

When the Stevens party set out for the Pacific Coast they opened the first wagon road to California. Their route became the western section of the original emigrant road to California and eventually was chosen for the main line of the Southern Pacific and Highway U.S. 40.

The editor informs us that the historical importance of this intrepid crossing has never been fully recognized, probably because the chief document pertaining to the Stevens party has remained almost unknown and unavailable. The document is Moses Schallenberger's own account of crossing the plains and of his winter-long vigil at Donner Lake, when he was 17 years old, alone in a snow-buried cabin and only foxes for food.

The book, of which there were only 350 copies bound, is of special interest to early day residents of Santa Clara County where Schallenberger lived and raised his family. One daughter became Mrs. Thomas Montgomery of San Jose and later of Santa Cruz; Dr. Margaret Schallenberger McNaught, for many years a member of the faculty of the old San Jose Normal School; and Miss Frances Schallenberger, a truly beloved San Jose teacher for many years. All three of these well-known women have now passed from this earth, but we who knew them still remember and value their friendship.

Though Schallenberger dictated the story in the form of notes to his daughter, Dr. Margaret McNaught, the manuscript which she prepared has disappeared. An article in the San Francisco Call, Sept. 13, 1864, is entitled, "An Old Pioneer Company." It is not signed, but is stated to be by "A Lady of This City." Bancroft suggests "perhaps Mrs. Montgomery," and Stewart writes that he concurs. In 1888, "Pen Pictures from the

Garden of the World," edited by H.S. Foote, was published. The account of the journey of the Stevens party, given under the sub-title "Story of the Murphy Party," is Mr. Schallenberger's absorbing and well-told narrative. It is this pen-picture that Stewart uses for the Bancroft Library's fourth publication.

After arriving in California in 1844 Schallenberger worked first as a clerk in the store of Larkin and Green in Monterey. He resisted the lure of gold, Stewart writes, but in July, 1848, working on shares with Larkin, he took five cartloads of goods to the mines, and sold them at high prices. He returned to Monterey in October and remained here until 1850. In that year his older sister who had raised him, and her husband, Dr. and Mrs. John Townsend, both died on their farm near San Jose, leaving an infant son. Schallenberger moved to San Jose, took charge of the boy and property, and remained there the rest of his life. He was a member of the Santa Clara County Pioneer Society. He died in 1909.

George R. Stewart, the author of "The Opening of the California Trail," has explored most of the Steven's Route on foot, by car, and from the air; and he has brought to the editing of Schallenberger's story his skill as a "literary and historical investigator." The addition of some unusually fine photographs increases the interest of this presentation of one of the great human interest stories of the West.