

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

November 18, 1955

'Don't Tax the Grape!'

The Book Club of California has completed the 1955 Keepsake Series of "The Vine in Early California," and distributed the last five to the membership. A new feature which will be greatly appreciated is an index and an additional gift of a reproduction of the original letter written by J. Ross Browne from Washington, D.C. to the Hon. James A. Garfield of Ohio, informing him that he had sent him a few bottles of California wine. J. Ross Browne was the reporter to the Constitutional Convention held in Monterey in 1849 at which the State Constitution was drafted and signed. In 1866, the year he wrote the letter to Garfield he resided in Oakland, California.

In the letter Browne wrote: "I sent you the other day a few bottles of our native California wine, merely for the purpose of showing you that we are not, like the old fogley, looking out from behind the times, though it is possible we may get knocked in the head by a passing event.

"Such wine as this is calculated to strengthen the judgment and satisfy the most skeptical gentleman in the Halls of Congress of the importance of taking an interest of such vast prospective utility to the human race.

"Why, Sir, it would be murder," he continued, "in the first degree to strangle this infant giant of temperance, now innocently disporting himself in his cradle. Tax crinoline if you please; tax the light of woman's eye; tax the light of other days; tax your own ingenuity; tax human forbearance; tax Patience sitting on a monument smiling at Grief; tax wax, jacks, sacks, backs, tacks; tack a tax on all attacks on tax; but don't, I beseech you, tax such a beverage as this – the generous grape – with which you may be shot every day of your life, yet never hurt."

Then Browne goes on to implore the representative from Ohio "not to crush this innocent babe when it comes back to the House, appealing in plaintive accents to the tenderest sympathies of your nature. I trust you will take it by the hand with fatherly care, and say 'go forth, little one, and grow and flourish and give health and happiness to the human race!'"

Continuing with his appeal for the California wine, Browne writes: "Sir, the tears stand in my eyes when I picture to myself the stunted and wretched little hunchback that gentlemen in your House would make of this infant prodigy. Think of it yourself – as a father and a man! Staggering with five cents a gallon on its back through the desolated vineyards of California! Think of it as a Christian: "In the morning it growth up like a flower; in the evening it withereth away."

"I will not believe you can do such violence to human nature. No, Sir: it is not in that genial eye and generous face of yours to do it.

"I take it for granted you have tried the port. Sailors tell you, 'any port in a storm'; but I can assure you amid the storms of legislation, there is no port like Wilson's native brand. Go into that, Sir, and you will find it a haven of rest –

'A balm for the sickness of care

A bliss for a bosom unblest."

Browne ends his appeal against a tax on the wine from California with this paragraph: "Lest you should doubt what I say, I send you a copy of my travels in the East as a kind of certificate of character. Read that and you will find that a strict adherence to facts is my strong point. I never stretch the truth, but paint it just as it is – 'Stranger, stranger than fiction.'"