

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

February 17, 1956

Austin Strong

"I love to think of the things in Monterey, where I went to school with Miss Henry who married Herbert Hoover," wrote the late Austin Strong to Col. Roger S. Fitch during the late colonel's term as president of the Monterey History and Art Assn. The letter was written in 1947 and, along with many other records of the association, were turned over to the secretary for preservation.

Austin Strong was the son of the late Mrs. Isobel Field, the step-daughter of Robert Louis Stevenson. Her mother was Mrs. Fannie Osborne, who married Stevenson after they both left Monterey for San Francisco. Mr. Strong, the author of "Seventh Heaven," died in September 1952, at his summer home in Nantucket, Mass. But before his death arranged with his mother, then a resident of Santa Barbara, to present to the Stevenson House in Monterey their collection of Stevensoniana, including books, first editions, pictures, furniture and personal possessions of the noted Scottish author. It is this collection that visitors from all parts of the world come to Monterey to see and to study.

Strong's letter to Col. Fitch continues: "The old schoolhouse burned down, much to our joy, until two days later we went to school in the Colton House (Colton Hall). I knew Simoneau and Elviria Abrego and Dick Sargent and the Gomez family. Also, Senorita Bonifacio and Sanchez, the aunt of Aldolpho Sanchez who married Mrs. Stevenson's sister, Nellie Van de Grift" Mrs. Sanchez was also the author of a number of books on early California, including "Spanish and Indian Place Names in California," which has become a valuable reference book.

In describing Monterey, Strong wrote: "The whole town is naturally a romantic place in my memory as well as my mother's. When my mother goes, I shall be the last of the family alive who lived in Vailima and you can imagine what a queer feeling it gives me." However, the prophecy did not come true, for Mrs. Field outlived her son, her death occurring in Santa Barbara on June 26, 1953, at the age of 94. She never saw the Stevenson collection after it was placed in the house in Monterey where the writer lived for a short time after his first arrival in California.

"I am sending the zinc-lined box with the name Robert Louis Stevenson, Apia, Samoa, written in large white letters on the lid which has come loose. Be careful to examine a small paper inside on which is written 'Bournemouth' proving the authenticity of the box which was one of the packing cases which came to Samoa from there." This case is now on display in the southeast room in the Stevenson House on Houston street.

Mr. Strong goes on to tell how this and other cases arrived at Vailima, the Stevenson home in the Islands, where he and his mother were also to reside for several years. "Some of the cases were six feet by four, and I was there when they were opened on the great lawn in front of the house at Vailima. Naval officers from the H.M.S. Curacoa helped us open them, having to send to the man-of-war for the ship's armorer to open the zinc which was soldered. The lawn became a miniature village of great packing cases while German overseers with whips drove the poor black boys from the Marquesas as they came up through the forest road carrying these cases on their shoulders. It was a fascinating sight to see the Chippendale furniture unloaded on the lawn, the beautiful silver, Sargent and Hogarth paintings, busts, a Rodin statuette presented to R. L. S. himself. You see these things I would like to tell your group so that they will understand, I think, a little more personally the strange magic and wonder that these remains and oddments have clinging to them and it is right and good that they find a permanent resting place in the Old Town by the Sea."

Austin Strong's father was Joe Strong, an early California artist who was a friend of Stevenson. Jules Tavenier and other writers and artist of the middle 1800s who lived or frequently visited in Monterey. Among the gifts to the Stevenson House from Mrs. Field and her son, is a portrait of Stevenson painted by Joe Strong.