

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **The First Gold Nugget**

Bancroftiana, published occasionally by the Friends of the Bancroft Library, University of California, has outdone itself this month in the interesting items which are published. We were particularly interested in a story concerning California's "First Nugget." This nugget, claimed to be the first, has been given to the library and will be on exhibit at the Friends' annual meeting on May 20th.

For more than 100 years this nugget has been exhibited as the original piece of gold found near Sutter's Mill at Coloma on Jan. 24, 1848. Preserved by Elizabeth Jane Wimmer, who, as the wife of Peter L. Wimmer, cooked for the men building Sutter's Mill in 1848, the nugget has figured since 1855 in the Wimmer family's claims to a large share of the fame attendant on the gold discovery. It comes to Bancroft with supporting affidavits sworn to by Mr. and Mrs. Wimmer in 1885.

The history of the Wimmer family is a history of early California from the period just before the gold rush. They were overland immigrants from Missouri in 1846. It is a well-known fact that, after James Marshall found gold specimens in the tail race of Sutter's Mill, they were tested according to one method of the day. Mrs. Wimmer had been making soap, and the gold was boiled in the kettle of this home-made soap, coming out untarnished. With the genuineness of the gold thus determined. Marshall rode off to tell Sutter of his find. The various accounts of the discovery given by Marshall, some as early as 1856, are contradictory, and have led to the conclusion that the original piece of gold was a fake.

Marshall told James Hutchings in 1857 that the first piece he found "weighed about 50 cents." Marshall also said that Wimmer bought a stock of merchandise late in the spring of 1848, and "Mrs. Wimmer being my treasurer, used \$450 of my money to complete the purchase; among which was the first piece of gold which I had found."

Bancroftiana reports: "Nevertheless, as quoted in the Coloma Empire County Argus of that time, the Wimmers as early as 1855 claimed to have retained possession of the epoch - making find." As the Argus put it: "This first piece of gold is now in the possession of

Mrs. Wimmer and weighs six pennyweights or 11 grains. The piece was given to her by Marshall himself."

It is said that for many years Mrs. Wimmer wore the nugget like a necklace in a little buckskin bag. When in 1887 she disposed of it to California Atty. W. W. Alien, it was in consideration of his promise to publish a book setting forth the Wimmer story - a promise made good in the California Gold Book (San Francisco and Chicago, 1893), a work he wrote in collaboration with R. B. Avery. Allen exhibited the nugget at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. and that same year sold it to the noted Chicago collector, Charles F. Gunther, in whose family it was afterward preserved.

The nugget's weight, as reported in 1855, would give it an intrinsic worth, if pure, of about \$14 by present gold values, the editor of Bancroftiana reports. Its value in 1893, he says, was \$5.10. The "Wimmer nugget" is about the size of the tip of a woman's forefinger though only half as thick.

It is interesting to note that our neighboring city. Watsonville is represented in the files of old newspapers in the Bancroft Library. Bancroftiana reports that through the generous gift of Norriss W. Hetherington of Berkeley and Joseph Genser of El Cerrito, the library has received the publisher's file of the Rustler. This independent newspaper was edited by Joseph Hetherington and associates in Watsonville, from Dec. 8, 1888, to June 25, 1897.

The editor writes that journalism in Watsonville at that time produced many rivalries. It is interesting to notice that the Rustler's boast of being "independent in all things, neutral in none," brought it into conflict with the Republican Pajaronian and the Democratic Transcript.

The files of The Rustler should prove to be an important source of information, for it presents a lively and authentic picture of the life in the Pajaro Valley, the directors of Bancroft believe. Although the issues for 1891 and 1893 have disappeared, the Bancroft Library's files of The Rustler is very likely the most complete, if not the only one in existence. Bancroft is pleased with the valuable gift, a worthy addition to its early California newspaper collection - one of the most extensive in the world.