

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **California Hot Springs**

Oscar Lewis, vice president of The Book Club of California and author of "Here Lives the Californians", "Bay Window Bohemia", "The Big Four", and many other books on the West, has compiled No. 5 in the Keepsake series issued this year by the Book Club. This issue features Hot Springs Hotel, Calistoga, illustrated with a Britton & Rey lithograph of Calistoga Springs in 1871, through the courtesy of the Huntington Library.

It is claimed that the Hot Springs at Calistoga was one of the most interesting, both from the historical and literary standpoint, in the early California spa days. For closely associated with its story are two names that loom large in the pioneer annals of the State - those of its founder, Sam Brannan, and its most widely known guest, the frail Scotch romancer, Robert Louis Stevenson.

Sam Brannan's story is well known. He was a shrewd New Englander, native of Maine, who became an elder in the Mormon church, led a group of co-religionists round the Horn to the village of Yerba Buena (San Francisco) in 1846 - the year of the American conquest of the territory and the year the United States flag was first raised at the Old Custom House in Monterey. He promptly became an important figure in California affairs.

Brannan is credited with the organization of the historic vigilance committee in San Francisco, he printed San Francisco's first newspaper, performed its first marriage ceremony, preached its first Protestant sermon, promoted its first school, and started the first store in the Sacramento Valley, which furnished materials for historic Sutter's Mill, where the first gold was found. He was the state's first millionaire and made it one of the world's great wine-growing regions.

Among the numerous properties Brannan acquired was a tract of land at the upper end of Napa Valley, on which were located a number of hot springs. It was the presence of these that led him to establish there a vacation resort to which prosperous residents of San Francisco and the surrounding country could come to escape the fogs and cold winds of the Bay area. He named his spa "Calistoga", that being a contraction of "California and Saratoga", and indicative of his oft-

expressed resolve to make it the "Saratoga of the West."

In its heyday, the Hot Springs Hotel, as it came to be called - was all its founder had envisioned, numbering among its guests the wealthy and socially prominent of the entire northern half of the State. The main group of buildings erected by Brannan at a cost estimated at from \$250,000 to twice that much, was a rambling structure that housed the office, dining and ballrooms, and on the floor above quarters for guests occupying single rooms. There were 25 small cottages, with tiny gardens. There were also the bathhouses, skating pavilion, Japanese tea garden and fully equipped racetrack. The resort enjoyed its greatest popularity during the 1860's and early 1870's. When its most famous guest stopped there in the summer of 1880 much of its former glory had faded.

Robert Louis Stevenson and his bride seemingly found the Hot Springs an agreeable place to spend their honeymoon. Later, in "The Silverado Squatters", he wrote of the hotel and its attendant cottages, "each with a veranda and a weedy palm before the door." Some, he stated were occupied by permanent residents and the rest by "ordinary visitors" to the hotel. "And a very pleasant way this is," he continued, by which you have a little country cottage of your own, without domestic burdens, and by the day or week."

But despite its attractions, the Stevenson's' stay there was brief, for the expense was more than he could afford, the cost of cottage, meals and baths added up to a formidable \$10 per week per person, Oscar Lewis reports. It was mainly for that reason that the honeymooners presently took quarters at Silverado, on the slopes of Mt. St. Helena, an abandoned silver mine."