

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

October 28, 1957

The Geysers

Because we had so recently visited in Sonoma and Napa counties, we have been most interested in this year's series of Keepsakes published for its membership by the Book Club of California. One of the most interesting is the history and description of "The Geysers of Sonoma County," compiled by John A. Hussey, regional historian, National Park Service and a director in the Book Club.

Dr. Hussey begins his story: "In April 1847 that intrepid bear-killer William Bell Elliott, who had crowded many adventures into nearly half a century of living, received the surprise of his life. Hunting grizzlies in the mountains of Sonoma County between Cloverdale and Calistoga, he came upon a narrow canyon which he thought surely must be the gate to Hades. Crowded between the barren, many-hued banks of the defile for a distance of a quarter mile were a number of hot springs, fumaroles and steam vents, all appearing to smoke like the ruins of a recently burned city. The geysers, which were not geysers at all, had been discovered."

News of this phenomena did not arouse more than local curiosity until about 1851, when a thin stream of sightseers began to trickle through the trackless wilderness to view the hot springs. A man named Levy saw an opportunity here and built a house on a level plateau - described as a "leafy dell" in later promotional literature - overlooking the geysers. In 1854, a Major Ewing opened a rude canvas hotel near Levy, and the two men joined forces to cater to the tourists, Twenty visitors signed the register that year, so Dr. Hussey discovered in his research. During 1856-1858 the tent was replaced by a two-story hotel made from planks sawed on the spot.

The hotel did not prosper during its first decade. A succession of operators suffered "great pecuniary" losses, so much so that a visitor in 1861 received the impression that the place had already had its day. Yet at the moment The Geysers stood on the threshold of a boom.

In 1863. the turning point came when the celebrated knight of the whip, Clark Foss opened a stage line from Healdsburg to The Geysers. Calistoga became the terminus of a railroad in 1868, and the next year Foss opened a second stage line from that point to the

resort. From that time until his accidental death in 1885, "Old" Foss dominated transportation to The Geysers and as long as he did so the hotel prospered.

Among the visitors to The Geysers were many of the great and near great: U. S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Horace Greely, Garibaldi, and William Jennings Bryan, to mention a few. From the later 1860's to the early 1880's, a visit to The Geysers was a "must" for tourists to California and it became fashionable for California residents to risk the hair-raising ride in Foss's open wagons to spend a day or more among the thermal wonders of Sonoma County. About 3,500 guests stayed at The Geysers during 1875 and the hotel was so crowded during the summer of 1882 that "people were compelled to sleep in the bathhouses and on the billiard tables."

Dr. Hussey notes in his comments that "The Geysers made no pretense of luxury." Easygoing informality was its boast, and from all accounts, it lived up to that slogan. Mrs. Frank Leslie complained that the hotel was "constructed upon a novel and decidedly breezy plan, with thin board partitions which permitted guests to hear themselves discussed with frankness and candor."

The swimming pool, the mineral baths, the hunting, and fishing in the surrounding hills were not enough to attract people for long stays, particularly after the more spectacular scenic wonders of the West, such as Yosemite and the true geysers of the Yellowstone, became accessible.

After 1885, The Geysers declined rapidly as a popular resort. Valiant attempts were made during the next decade to keep up patronage by appealing to the lower-income vacation trade. A visit to The Geysers, said one advertisement, was "the grandest, most beneficial for health, and cheapest pleasure trip in the world." But the hotel's great days could not be revived. On the other hand, the resort continued to attract a steady patronage which has kept it alive to the present day.

The Wall Street Journal of Feb 28, 1857 carried the announcement that a new company had been formed to generate electricity by harnessing the power of Sonoma's geysers.