

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Old Mountain Towns

We have returned from Nevada City, Rough and Ready and Timbuctoo. This is our decision: When we retire and should we leave Monterey, we think we would be more than willing to settle down in this delightful small town of Nevada City, enjoy the hospitable folk who live there, the old homes and the fascinating history of this mountain community in Nevada County.

October is the month to visit there. From a scenic viewpoint there is nothing to compare with its beautiful trees that in the autumn change their colors into a bewildering display that cannot be equaled by any city according to the chamber of commerce folder, and we are in perfect accord with this extravagant statement. It is a friendly city—an orderly, peaceful and home-loving community, where a third generation are coming back to buy for themselves the old homes which their grandparents had constructed in this early mining community during the first part of the 1850s.

We visited a few of these homes and could not resist congratulating the new owners upon their choice of a home in a community where their children would enjoy an outdoor life and in which they would be welcomed by old time family friends and their descendants.

Our hosts were Mr. and Mrs. Ray Polk. They lived at the corner of A and Nihell streets, where the green lawn had turned golden with fallen yellow leaves from the maples, plane and liquid amber trees. Next door was a nursery which had been established in 1870. On the rock gate-post was a marker in memory of the man who has established this horticultural venture in the very early days of Nevada City. The trees there are now full grown and are enjoyed in the gardens of those who have purchased lots which once formed part of the original nursery property,

There are other hills in Nevada City bearing such names as Prospect Hill in honor of the miners of '49: Lost Hill and Piety Hill. It was Piety Hill which amused and interested us most. Here the street names fitted the hill, there were Jordan, Gethsemane, Zion, Calvary, Cross and Tribulation. There appeared to be no sorrow or tribulation there for the houses were well kept and the view was one of remarkable beauty.

In Nevada City the proud citizens tell the visitors that the past history teems with the story of the gold mines, whose fabulous returns, in the early days, netted the winners enough wealth to live comfortable for the rest of their lives. The city today has a population of more than 3,000 inhabitants.

We visited the two firehouses, No. 1 is now the home of the Nevada County Historical Museum. Here on display are the implements of the gold period, garb and records of pioneer times, as well as historical items of the Chinese, who were numerous in this country during the Gold Rush. No. 2 fire house is a venerable brick structure which housed the city's pioneer firefighting equipment. It was built in 1861.

We spent some time in the National Hotel where the traveling public has been entertained for over 90 years. The old registers we were privileged to see, contain the names of most of the West's most colorful characters.

We were disturbed when our host told us that the Ott Assay Office was to be demolished to make way for progress. This stone building was built by James J. Ott in 1859. He assayed the silver ore which precipitated the great Comstock Rush in Nevada. The office was founded over a century ago.

The story is told here and elsewhere that in through the doors of the assayer's office on Commercial street, one memorable day in 1853, a miner from across the Sierra entered with puzzling specimens from the new "strike" made near Washoe Lake in Nevada. The report carried out from the building proved to be the most sensational bit of news since the announcement of Marshall's discovery of gold at Coloma in 1848, for it heralded the fabulous wealth of the Comstock silver mines, which produced almost one billion dollars.

We motored by the Red Castle on the steep slopes of Prospect Hill above the city's plaza. It is a towering brick building which has long been a mecca for camera fans were were told. This house, one of the few remaining symbols of pioneer architecture, was brought by the historical society in order that it might be saved from destruction. It has now been sold to private parties who have pledged themselves to restore it authentically and make the old structure their home.

For a time Nevada City was known as Deer Creek Dry Diggin's. In March 1850 the name of the town is given as Nevada City, although in a list of post offices for the year 1851 it appeared as Nevada. When, a county was

established in that section of the Sierra country in 1851 it was also called Nevada, and the town of that name was made the county seat. Ten years later, when the state of Nevada was formed, the citizens of the town of Nevada in California bitterly protested that they had first claim to the name. The matter was appealed to Congress, but that body refused to act. Consequently, its citizens decided that their town should henceforth be known as Nevada City.

In the book "Historic Spots in California" the editors write; "As a motorist of today's glides down the lone smooth grade from the little old mining community of Town Talk, he beholds a panorama of mountains at the foot of which nestles Nevada City, its roofs and tall church spires gleaming white through the shade trees. In spite of paved streets and busy motor cars, Nevada City is still a story-book town, a place of picturesque relics vividly depicting its historic past. Aged, steep-roofed houses, three and four stories high, cling to the precipitous walls of Deer Creek Canyon."

We had an exterior look at Miners Foundry on Spring street where the first improved water wheel designed by Lester. A Pelton in 1880, was made. The Pelton waterwheel was the first used to generate power for the local gold mines and soon became, and still is, an important factor in hydro-electric developments.