

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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'Seeing the Elephant'

From the recent issue of "Bancroftiana" a publication of the Friends of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, we learn that the director of that library, Dr. George Hammond, delivered the sixth annual Edith M. Coulter Lecture under the title "Who Saw the Elephant?" for the members of the California Library Assn., meeting in annual convention at Fresno last month.

Dr. Hammond took as his theme the development of a slang expression that began with the curiosity aroused by traveling circus menageries especially interest in the huge, lumbering but intelligent elephants. Americans were so curious to see a real elephant that the expression became a catchword which finally passed into the folk lore of the nation. Through transference, it grew into one of the most common expressions used by the Forty Niners. "By a simple transposition of values." Dr. Hammond stated, "the gold fields now became the elephant, and the would-be miner far more eager to see this new wonder than he had been to see the old one, that is, the elephant."

Those in attendance report that Dr. Hammond played hopscotch with history, "to use his own phrase, by drawing vivid pictures of events that have taken place long before Gold Rush days. The Conquistadores' exaggerated ideas of the importance of gold is understandable, he pointed out, when one considers the cultural influences to which they were subjected in Europe.

Marco Polo's travels opened the eyes of Europeans to the spices, gems and precious goods that were obtainable from the East. Later, Prince Henry and the Navigator's sea men explored the coast of Africa, discovered the Cape of Good Hope, and brought back spices from India.

The Portuguese had proved that what Columbus had discovered was not India but a spice-less New World; and the Spaniard in America, quite naturally, carried on the lusty tradition of pursuing and exploring the land.

Soon English and other Europeans took possession further north, and their colonies in time founded a new nation, the United States of America, which shortly

expanded to the Pacific Ocean. The discovery of gold in 1848 climaxed this period of national expansion.

The California gold fields did not yield up the riches most Americans had been led to believe they would. These Forty Niners had come West eager "to see the elephant" - that is, to see the gold fields, to test their dreams, to try to bring their hopes of riches to fruition. But the greater part of them either remained in California become its pioneer citizens or returned home, having "seen the elephant" - they had had their fling and had become much wiser, if not richer.

The Book Club of California included in the 1953 Keepsake series, "Pictorial Humor of the Gold Rush," a folder telling the story of the "Gold Rush Elephant." This is the Version of the Club:

"Like many other popular sayings, the phrase "to see the elephant" seems to have had multiple meanings, depending on era and area. To one it signified that he had surmounted and successfully survived the hazards of his long journey. He had seen the elephant and had reached the promised land. To another it meant that his mining claim had petered out and he must seek new diggings. (He, too, had 'seen the elephant.'!) To a more fortunate few it doubtless suggested that they had found the gold they came to seek. (They too, had 'seen the elephant' and were triumphantly heading home). To a new arrival in the San Francisco community, a night in its mud-infested streets and brilliantly lighted gambling houses offered a particularly good sight of the elephant.

To John N. Kerr, who on March 2, 1857 wrote his letter on the lettersheet, depicted in the folder, it not only meant that he had "seen the animal, but that the Gold Bluff excitement was a hoax, perhaps of elephantine proportions."