

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Books Of Yesterday

One hundred years ago table books were gift books in bindings suitable for placing on the library table where they lent a graceful and decorative touch to the surroundings. They contained the best poetry and prose of their day and the finest engravings. The bindings were of full calf, elaborately gold-tooled.

Among the table books listed in one of the most prominent California book dealers catalogue are these interesting books of that nature: "The Gem of the Season," illustrated with ten fine engravings, gold tooled floriated decorations on covers and spines, edges gilt New York "circa," 1860; a presentation copy to a Miss Sarah A Srevens, Christmas, Dec. 25, 1860. A Boston "circa", "The Diadem," a gift book for all occasions, with gold-tooled roses and flowers printed in 1858, is listed.

"The History of All Nations" by S. G. Goodrich in two volumes had an amusing comment from the book shop. "Soon after Fort Sumter lowered its flag in April 1861, this work was issued. The 97 intervening years have not dimmed the beauty of the binding which contains a fine history of the world, even though the map of California and Utah Territory, while naming the cities of San Diego, San Juan and San Luis Rey, does not show Los Angeles."

It is always great fun to collect cook books, so the Southern California Book Shop prints a bit about this art of cookery. The first American cook book, "American Cookery," written by Amelia Simmons, "An American Orphan," is a \$15 facsimile of one of two copies of the first edition of 1796. The dealer states that this is a beautiful facsimile of the original work, the first cookbook for Americans; the first appearance of receipts for "Johnny Cake", "Hoe Cake" and "Indian Slapjacks." "The work contains an essay by Mary Tolford Wilson which explains all details of this our FIRST cookbook. Limited to 800 copies; should be owned by every collector," so the editor writes.

Increasingly rare and prized by collectors are the illustrated lettersheets which were so popular in California during the 1850's. Having the same appeal as the postal card of today, they often served better than the writers' own descriptions to reveal to their families

and friends "back in the States" the sights and scenes of life in El Dorado. Bancroftiana, the notes of the Friends of the Bancroft Library, quotes Harry T. Peters in his classic "California-in Stone" "The artists whose work was reproduced on the lettersheets were the reporters, cameramen, and, newsreel men of the time."

The Bancroft Library has long been collecting these lettersheets, vivid and important pictorial records of a colorful era in California history, and recently the library was fortunate in finding 36, all in mint condition. They are described as ranging in mood and subject from humorous cartoons entitled "Mr. Gringo's Experience as a Rancho" and "Ballot box stuffers electing their Men" to dramatic views of "The Fire in Sacramento City (1852)" and town views of San Francisco, Jamestown, Sonora, Springfield, and La Porte are of historical value.

In 1954 the Book Club of California gave as a Keepsake series to its membership a dozen folders, each containing a reproduction of a numerous drawing of the California Gold Rush. They were printed by the Grabhorn Press and edited by Carl I. Wheat.

Mr. Wheat explained the choice of these letterheads and this pictorial Humor for the year's Keepsakes thusly:

"There was a freshness and a quality of uniqueness about the California Gold Rush. Never before had so many men traveled so far with their women or at such a cost in human energy and sufferings. When they arrived at the diggings, they found life no picnic. Small wonder that their humor was often far from lighthearted, - or light-handed. Yet it is from the cartoons of the period that we of a later century may find the truest understanding of those lusty days. Then, as ever, a "picture is worth ten thousand words."