

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

October 20, 1961

### **Letters From The California Gold Fields**

We find from a recent catalogue sent to us by G. F. Hollingsworth of Manhattan Beach that the centennial issue of "The Shirley Letters from the California Mines" 1851-1852, written by Louise Clappe, is now a valuable book. The price of \$12.50 is quoted and we paid \$3.50 for a copy in 1959. The Western Americana, California Catalogue 40, notes

"Good edition of a work originally published in 1854 ... may well be accorded first place in any gathering of notable Gold Rush literature. It is listed in the Zamorano 80 as "now out of print and becoming quite scarce."

The story of Dame Shirley is one of the most delightful books of Western Americana planned as a reprint in connection with the California Centenary Celebrations. These letters were written by the author who called herself "Dame Shirley", to her sister in New England. They were apparently copied by Steve Massett of the Marysville Herald and then sent on to Ferdinand C. Ewer of The Pioneer, of California Monthly Magazine.

This act as Carl I. Wheat points out in his introduction to the reprint, "... places us, at this later date, ever more in his debt, for these letters from the Sierra diggings form a priceless contribution to our knowledge and understanding of that long vanished era - the earliest flush day of the great gold rush."

In 1922 Thomas C. Russell printed as his private press in San Francisco another reprint of the Shirley letters. His book also was illustrated with reproductions from the contemporary lithographs and woodcuts, as were the 1850 editions.

Those interested in the early history of California whether students or casual readers, owe a large debt of, gratitude to Carl I. Wheat, and to the early publisher of the Marysville paper, for printing these choice and scarce historical books.

The Shirley letters, written by Mrs. Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe, are a valuable record of one section of gold diggings of California in 1851 and 1852. They were written with no thought of publication, from Rich Bar and Indian Bar on the North Fork of the Feather River, to her sister in Amherst, Mass.

In 1855 the Rev. Frederick C Ewer of San Francisco, a friend, eagerly made use of her interesting letters in the Pioneer, a monthly magazine he was just establishing. Publication began with the first number, January, 1854, and continued through the life of the magazine, until December 1855.

Bancroft, in Vol. VII of his history of California, makes note of the indebtedness to "Shirley" of later writers on the early days in California. The section, "A Typical History of a Mining Camp in 1851-'52," is taken from Shirley's account.

"A marvelously skillful and undoubtedly truthful, history," Dr. Royce tells us, "Infinitely more helpful to us than the perverse romanticism of a thousand such tales as Bret Harte's."

Interesting bits from these letters were undoubtedly seized by Bret Harte and expanded and enlivened by his genius into incidents in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." It is even probable that the incident of the tame frog in the barroom furnished Mark Twain with the foundation of his story, "The Jumping Frog," thinks Mrs. Helen Purdy, who wrote a review of the Shirley letters when they were printed in 1922.

Louise Clappe, ("Dame Shirley") who came as a young bride with her husband, Dr. Fayette Clappe, to San Francisco in 1849, was a gifted and educated girl of high connection in the East. The spirit of adventure was strong within her and, after a sojourn of a year in primitive San Francisco, early in 1851 she followed her physician husband to the gold diggings of the Sierra, where he had gone in search of health. Mrs. Clappe was small, slight of stature and delicate, but no hardship daunted her indomitable spirit, and more inconveniences were good - humoredly accepted and transformed by her into treasured experiences, to be afterward recounted by her skillful pen.

Her first impressions of Rich Bar were vividly described. The Empire Hotel was "the only building in the settlement with a live upstairs and two or three glass windows," both unknown luxuries in all other buildings. Even the "buildings" were mostly tents, flimsy cloth stretched around a few stakes. The roof of the hotel was covered with green canvas and the barroom lined with that eternal crimson calico, which flushes the whole Golden West." There were four other women in Rich Bar when Mrs. Clappe arrived.

During all her stay at the mines, Dame Shirley kept up her cheery letters to her sister in the old New England home, she glossed over nothing. As gambling, thieving, suicide, murder, hangings, floggings and duels alternated with happier sights, she experienced them and described them. To the last she was full of enthusiasm for the beauty and wonders of California and of appreciation of the good of her fellow beings. She saw beneath their rough exteriors and found the worth which still dwelt beneath the surface in most of them.

After a year and a half, Dr. and Mrs. Clappe returned to San Francisco. Here they established a home, but reverses came and Shirley's last years there were spent as an inspiring and beloved schoolteacher. Charles Warren Stoddard, who wrote and died in Monterey, was one of her pupils.

Mrs. Clappe returned to her home in the East, and lived for a time in close association with Mrs. Bret Harte and her family in Morristown, N. J., where she died in 1906.