

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Stevenson's Living Book**

In 1944, two women sat over a cup of coffee in Hollywood obsessed with the idea of saving for future generations an old inn, an abandoned silver mine and a wooded mountain 80 miles north of San Francisco.

Why? One of these women wrote: "Because Mount St. Helena is a living book. It is the scene of Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Silverado Squatters." These women felt sure that many besides themselves would enjoy pausing there to recall the love story of RLS, remembering how he followed Fanny Osborne across the ocean and a continent to Monterey, how he married her in San Francisco after months of illness and near starvation, later found squatters' quarters in Silverado ghost town half-way up the mountain.

The two women dreamed that day of visions of future motorists in route to Lake County resorts or the Redwood highway, crossing the Golden Gate bridge, following the Bay Shore Highway to Vallejo and driving north through Napa Valley; stopping at Bale Mill (built in 1846), the old stone wineries at St. Helena, the geysers at Calistoga and the Toll House on the mountain. Then they saw these people hike up the switchback trail to Silverado mine, pointing out the inscription on the Stevenson monument adjacent to the main shaft:

"This tablet placed by the clubwomen of Napa County, marks the site of the cabin occupied in 1880 by Robert Louis Stevenson and bride, while he wrote "The Silverado Squatters."

These two women were not the first to dream of saving this historic mountain from despoilers. The people of Napa County, many of them descendants of the people in the Silverado Squatters, had long wanted to preserve it, for the sake of their own past as well as Stevenson's. Mollie Patton, who gave the land on which the women's clubs erected their tablet, wanted to leave her 400 historically priceless acres to the State of California but the mortgage that hung above her roof fell with a crash when she died.

The two Women who had had a vision of saving a memorial to Stevenson decided that they should go out to raise the money for the much desired project. In those years if the people or the state or community

would raise half the needed sum the State would provide the other half. That meant \$7,000 for each. The Napa Chamber of Commerce became the sponsor. Norman B. Livermore wrote offering to deed, 40 acres adjoining the park at once and thereby reducing the amount of actual cash that was needed.

An amusing bit of history may be repeated here. Edith Livermore interested Somerset Maugham, the English novelist, and asked him to "pass the hat in England." He put her off but when she wrote him that she would sell his autograph from his rejection he promptly wrote her another suitable rejection letter.

There was a two-day celebration in Napa, Dec. 2 and 3, 1944, Joseph R. Knowland, chairman of the park commission, was present and enthusiastically praised the women for their work and interest. Two Napa women, Mrs. L. E. Stratton and Mrs. Maggie Turner gave personal reminiscences of the childhood contracts with Robert Louis Stevenson. They had played mumbly peg with him evenings before his hotel cottage at Calistoga when they brought milk Fanny Stevenson had ordered.

After a tour of the countryside which Stevenson had also trod, Ivy Loeber, in the name of the Napa County Women's Club, laid a wreath on the Stevenson tablet with a short re-dedication speech. Mr. Knowland told of the park commission's plan for preservation of the forest, for improved roads, and trails, for picnic tables, and for a museum at Toll House. Much of this program has not been carried on and we hope that very soon the commission will find it within its power to mend the trail to the monument so if another bad storm should come, the "open book" will not be carried away in a flood of rocks and soil to the very bottom of Mount St. Helena.

One of these dedicated women who had this dream of saving the setting of the "Silverado Squatters" was our own Mrs. Anne Issler, curator of the Stevenson House in Monterey and author of "Happier for His Presence" and "Stevenson at Silverado". It is now too late to save the Toll House, it was torn down several years ago, but a small museum is, we understand, planned to house an exhibit of mining equipment, pioneer relics, and hikers' and riders' precious possessions. It is also hoped that the memorial park will be extended to the top of Mount St. Helena with purchase from the federal government of surplus property.