

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **How The Jumping Frog Almost Became California's Emblem**

"Frogs, Flags and Bears" is an historical story of California telling how Mark Twain's jumping frog almost became the heraldic emblem of the official California State Flag, by John Sherwood Coates of Carmel.

The story begins with several guesses as to how California got its name, and this is now the accepted origin of the name that always conjures up romance. There is a romantic novel, *Adamis de Gauala*, written by Garcia Ordonez de Montalvo, whose hero, Esplandian, relates his romantic exploits in this land of beauty, riches and doncilitas - this fabulous place called California.

Mr. Coates continues:

"Where man has roamed, explored and fought and conquered, he has always backed his exploits by an outward expression of pageantry. Pageantry calls for color and color is best achieved in fabrics, so he devised banners, flags and standards to designate his origin, his loyalty, his strength and his love. Flags in great array came to the shores of California and although historians generally are in accord that California was under but three flags, these historians are prone to slur over the fact that California has existed at times and in part, under 12 flags of separate national and personal interests in its long and at times tumultuous history.

"It was the 13th flag that almost became the official flag of California, so it is necessary to give you these historical facts because the flags and the frogs are all mixed up.

"What Information I have gained I give you happily and report that to get this information has taken me into many interesting places, among them Folsom Prison, and the gaining of friendships and valued acquaintances along the way."

Mr. Coates had heard that on the walls of the prison employees' mess room there were excellent paintings done by a prison inmate who depicted thereon descriptions of the events leading to the planting of 12 different flags on the soil of California. He had to see these paintings and therefore had to search the records of history to verify his picture stories. Although this prisoner has left behind him interesting recordings of

history they may not tell the story of California's numerous flags in words as they are taught in school, but facts as he depicted them are, quite authentic, basically, and may be a new text on California history will carry the facts as presented and give them a position of importance.

These paintings on the prison walls were done by a "lifer" whose name was Ralph D. Pecor, according to Mr. Coates. Why he was put in prison the writer does not know and this was not the purpose of his story. "There must have been a reason why God endowed this man with a gift so amazing and left some other faculty undeveloped that caused him to spend so much of his life behind prison walls. . . . However, the answer may be in the paintings in the prison chapel where he has painted, among others, the scene of the Lord's Last Supper, on the rear altar wall. A thoroughly bad man could not have created such a painting. It is there where about every convict possibly has the chance, at some time in his prison life, to stand before the likeness of Christ and His disciples, and, in some way, a message must go into the eyes of the viewer, whether it makes him think of what the Savior can do for him, only He could know. The painting has "life" to it I have never experienced before in viewing a picture. However, I have to tell here, how I felt something that I have never experienced before from having reverently stood in awe before this painting.

"So Pecor's ability to paint must have done something for many unfortunate men placed within these austere walls - more than wardens and guards and do-gooders have done in all their efforts. That alone must be the justification for his great talent - and that it is not lost to the world and is doing some great good."

We will continue this fascinating story in future issues, with Mr. Coates' generous permission.