

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Cypress Fairy Tale

"From Lebanon to Monterey" is the story of Aleck, the stage driver, and his longest drive.

On Cypress Point, at Monterey, there stands a weather-beaten but impressive company of ancient trees, familiar to most globe-trotters. These trees are quite unique. The Monterey cypress is a true native son, indigenous to California alone; in fact, growing only around the Bay of Monterey, according to an article I have found among the possessions of the late Miss Ann Hadden, former Monterey county librarian.

Yet the public generally knows these trees as "Cedars of Lebanon" and believes them to belong to the family which contributed to the building of the temple. The error persists, in speech and print, in spite of protests from botanists who place truth before dramatic effect. What is doubtless the origin of the misnomer is set forth in a letter from the late Harry A. Greene, president of the Monterey Tree-growing Club, which incidentally, once had the largest collection of trees in America.

"Some years ago, a man named Aleck Early was driving for the Hotel Del Monte and making himself remembered for his wit by people from all parts of the world. Many of his stories, told to wondering tourists, were prefaced by 'when me and Charley'. This was a reference to Charles Crocker. Having become too old to continue in the Crocker employment, he was sent to Hotel Del Monte by Crocker, who was the real sponsor of the famous hostelry, to be given a berth. As driver for the hotel's livery stable, Aleck spent his happiest days entertaining tourists with his wonderfully told tales.

"Aleck Early's favorite story was evoked when his guests were driven into the weird presence of the ancient cypresses at Point Cypress on the world-famous Seventeen Mile Drive. This was the tale of a highly developed race of people who came to this vicinity thousands of years ago and built a magnificent city with a matchless temple of worship. Pointing to a large sand dune, he would explain that a partial exploration had revealed immense columns and capitals, strangely but beautifully carved, prostrate under the sands.

This story, told in very ungrammatical sentences yet with originality of wording and convincing manner, ended with the recital of the extinction of the colonists

by hordes of cannibals. At its conclusion, Aleck would wage his whip toward the ancient cypress, trees still growing in the vicinity of the 'buried city' and declare that they had been planted about 6000 years ago, from the Cedars of Lebanon, brought across the sea from Syria.