

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 13, 1965

### **Gold Rush Merchant**

Stephen Chapin Davis was seventeen when he came to California to find his gold not in the mines but in the field of business. Many of the gold-rush fortune seekers left accounts of their travels but few were as young as the diarist, who wrote a diary in 1850, enroute to California which has been published this year under the title of "California Gold Rush Merchant" and published from the manuscript now in the Huntington Library collections. The book is edited by Benjamin B. Richards, at present the librarian at Knox College, Galesburg, Ill. His studies at Claremont fostered an intense interest in California history.

The original "Map of the Gold Rush Region of California" done in 1850 by Robert H. Ellis is reproduced as an illustration.

Young Davis, raised in Nashua, N.H., tried an assortment of occupations, but his real forte was as a merchant, Enroute to California in 1850, he made an initial investment of five hundred New York newspapers that he sold at a handsome profit in Panama, Acapulco, and San Francisco. For two years he ran a store at Coulterville in the gold country and on his return to New England carried \$3,000 worth of gold dust.

Detailed accounts in the diary tell of the uprisings at Chagres, his hardships of the Isthmus crossings, a flood in the San Joaquin area, the aftermath of the San Francisco fire; and Stephen Davis' own struggles to transport supplies for his business in the mining district. While on board various ships, he describes steerage and cabin passage, and never fails to report a passing steamer.

Because of his wide travels by sea and land and his forthright on-the-spot descriptions, many aspects of nineteenth century life are illuminated. Stephen exhibited fortitude and perspicacity, among firm moral and religious convictions. His motto was "Energy, Perseverance and Economy."

The Book Club of California has published for this Christmas season a delightful historical book, "The Young Miner" or "Tom Nelson in California," by Horatio Alger, Jr. The introduction and bibliographical notes are by John Seelye.

Mr. Seelye writes: "If the myth of California was first shaped by the dream of El Dorado, it was given its final form in 1849, when that dream lumbered to life after a long sleep. California has a bear on its flag, but that is the wrong beast; it should be a bull symbol of the optimism that brought so many thousands of men stampeding over a westland of prairie, mountains and desert.

The gold of El Dorado was not real, but the gold of California was and many of the Forty-Niners found what they came after. The island prospered, like most islands, for if it was difficult to get there, so was it also hard to leave"

Horatio Alger Jr., the author of the "Young Miner" in diary form in the late 1860s "was a drab, shy, unsuccessful preacher," His message was "work hard, honor your parents, save your money, aim high, don't smoke, gamble or drink hard liquor." Born in 1832 the son of a Unitarian minister, Horatio was a minister himself.

In 1867, however, with the publication of "Ragged Dick," Horatio became a best-selling author and Alger became a household word. "He had discovered the secret of the bad good boy, the redeemable little sinner, who, reached in Huckleberry Finn" a sort of apotheosis.

For ten years after the publication of "Ragged Dick" Alger repeated the pattern of work-and-wonder, turning out titles that drove their meaning home with "Fame and Fortune," "Rough and Ready," "Luck and Pluck", etc. I am sure that if the reader procures a copy of "The Young Miner" or "Tom Nelson in California" he or she will find delightful reading and enjoy the many illustrations.

The resurrection of J. Ross Brown continues, according to Lawrence Clark Powell, book reviewer of Westways, a publication of the Automobile Club of Southern California, and one of these days we will have a definite biography of this engaging 19th Century western traveler, write, illustrator.

In "J. Ross Browne, Confidential Agent in Old California," Richard Dillon, that tireless historian who hangs his sombrero in the Sutro Library overlooking the Golden Gate, has ransacked government archives on the Potomac to give us a delightful account of Browne's muckraking as an agent of the U.S. Treasury

Department, The General Land Office and the Office of Indian Affairs.

During the Centennial Celebrations in California in 1946 and 1949, the Book Club of California published a book "Mule- back to the Convention." A review of Browne's California experiences as contained in his diary and other articles. Letters to his wife tell of his appointment to report the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention in Monterey, for which he received \$10,000 dollars.

Lucy Neely McLane, of Pacific Grove, author of "Piney Paradise" a documentary history of Pacific Grove, has written me this note: "By popular demand, a reprint of "Piney Paradise," issued first in 1952 and later in 1958, is being published by the "Academy Library Press." The Book is profusely illustrated with old and new photographs that should appeal to all enthusiasts of California and of American history.