

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 12, 1965

Shirley Letters

From Mrs. Bess S. McCollum the Monterey History and Art Association has received a number of books for its shelves at Casa Serrano. Mrs. McCollum is leaving the Peninsula to return to Seattle.

Among the books are Volumes I and II of "Mexico, and the Life of the Conqueror, Hernando Cortes," and Volumes I and II of "Peru," both by William H. Prescott. But best of all is a copy of "The Shirley Letters from the California Gold Mines" by Louise Clappe.

Printed during the California Centennial, it is now a valuable book. The price in 1961 was quoted as \$12.50 by a rare book dealer in Southern California; in 1951 the price was \$3.50.

The Western Americana, California Catalogue 40, notes: "Good edition of a work originally published in 1854 ... It may well be accorded first place in any gathering of notable Gold Rush literature."

The Shirley letters were written by "Dame Shirley" (Mrs. Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe), in 1851 and 1852 from Rich Bar on the North Fork of the Feather River to her sister in Amherst, Mass.

In 1854 the Rev. Frederick C. Ewer of San Francisco, a friend of Shirley, eagerly made use of them in the Pioneer, his new monthly magazine. Their publication began with the first number, January, 1854, and continued through the life of the magazine until December, 1855.

Bancroft, in his history of California, notes the indebtedness to Shirley of later writers on the mining days in California. Josiah Royce found authentic material for his chapter, "The Struggle for Order," in his book on California.

A marvelously skilful and undoubtedly truthful history, he tells us, "infinitely more helpful to us than the perverse romanticism of a thousand such tales as Mr. Bret Harte's."

Dame Shirley was the pen name of Louise Clappe, who came as a young bride with her husband, Dr. Fayette Clappe, to San Francisco in 1848. She was a gifted and educated girl of high connection in the East. The spirit of adventure was strong within her.

After a year in primitive San Francisco, early in 1851 she followed her physician-husband to the gold diggings in the Sierra, where he had gone to search for health.

Mrs. Clappe was small, slight in stature and delicate, but no hardship daunted her indomitable spirit; mere inconveniences were good-humoredly accepted and transformed into treasured experiences to be afterward recounted by her skillful pen.

Her first impressions of Rich Bar were quite vividly described. The Empire Hotel, which received herself and her husband, 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 bar room lined "with that eternal crimson calico which flushes the whole Golden West." There were only four women in Rich Bar when Mrs. Clappe arrived.

During 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 and duels alternated with happier sights, she experienced them and described them.

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

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