

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 17, 1967

Discovery of Gold

Printed last month by the Talisman Press in Georgetown, California, is a fascinating book entitled "James W. Marshall, the Discoverer of Gold in California, a Biography" by Theresa Gay.

One day in his old age, Marshall sat with a friend on a sunny porch in the little town of Kelsey, so the historical volume begins. Marshall was in an introspective mood. "Some day when I am gone," he began, "they will make a fuss over me." The remark was not unlike Marshall, subjective, impulsive, and at the same time full of understatement and implication.

In the years that followed the gold discovery, Marshall was both praised and persecuted, exploited and envied. All the while he pursued not a life of fame, but instead a quiet though active rural life in El Dorado County.

During the years immediately following the discovery, some miners thought Marshall had powers of divination and implored him to guide them to gold. Obliging them good-naturedly, but failing to locate a deposit, Marshall was sometimes pronounced a humbug, and that annoyed him.

Beginning in the mid 1850's charges appeared in the California press that Marshall was not the discoverer of gold. The dispute continued for several years deeply offending him. He was later drawn into a long and fruitless controversy centering on the exact date of the discovery, a controversy that continued until after his death.

In 1862 his cabin at Coloma was destroyed by fire. According to Marshall, many valuable documents and affidavits reflecting upon the gold discovery were lost in that fire. Marshall charged that it was the work of incendiaries whose intent was to destroy evidence that would substantiate his claims.

Theresa Gay writes further: "the 1870's the State of California granted Marshall a pension in recognition of his discovery. Complaints were made to the Legislature about the pension, and about Marshall's character, with the result that the pension was first reduced and then withdrawn altogether.

"Marshall's prophecy was to prove correct. Shortly after his death, the State of California did indeed make a fuss

over him. A towering monument was commissioned to stand over his grave on a hilltop over-looking the discovery site on the American River. On the day of dedication in 1890, the hilltop was a scene of momentous activity. There was an official program of events, organizations were represented, politicians made speeches, flags unfurled, bands played, and Marshall was eulogized. It was the sort of thing Marshall disliked, but the irony or it would have amused him."

The book begins with Marshall's childhood in New Jersey, family traditions, and family genealogy, and his travels to Ohio, Illinois, Nebraska, and Missouri are described. His trip to Oregon in 1844 is traced, and his arrival in California in 1845 with the Clyman-McMahon party where-upon he was employed at Sutter's Fort."