

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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RLS the Firebug

This amusing story of an experience of Robert Louis Stevenson, who visited in Monterey in 1879, under the title of "The Old Pacific Capital" was first published in 1880, but it remains today as a masterpiece of description of the Monterey that Stevenson knew.

A few weeks ago, a friend called me to inquire if Stevenson had ever set a fire in Monterey while he was here. He said he had asked two gentlemen, one a native son of this city and the other, although not a native of the Peninsula, but a long-time resident, if they had ever heard such a story. When they both denied ever hearing of the tale, I was called upon to answer.

Yes, Stevenson did set a fire in the hills above the old town, and the Monterey History and Art Association published "The Old Pacific Capital" in 1962 and the booklet is on sale at several of the State Historical Monuments in Monterey. The story is taken from a collection of Memories and Essays by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Now for a description of the fire which Stevenson set here many years ago. After discussing the forests near Monterey and the fires which might happen and do happen, Stevenson wrote: "I have an interest of my own in these forest fires, for I came so near to lynching on one occasion, that a braver man might have retained a thrill from the experience.

"I wished to be certain whether it was moss, that quaint funeral ornament of California forests, which blazed up so rapidly when the flame touched the tree.

"I suppose I must have been under the influence of Satan, for instead of plucking off a piece for an experiment, what should I do but walk up to a great pine tree in a portion of the wood which had escaped so much as a scorching, strike a match, and apply the flame gingerly to one of the tassels.

"The tree went off simply like a rocket, in three seconds it was a roaring pillar of fire. Close by I could hear the shouts of those who were at work combating the original conflagrating. I could see the wagon that had brought them tied to a live-oak in a piece of open; I could even catch the flash of an axe as it swung up through the underwood into the sunlight. Had anyone observed the result of my experiment my neck was

literally not worth a pinch of snuff; after a few minutes of passionate expostulation; I should have been run up a convenient bough.

"To die for faction is common evil;

"But to be hanged for nonsense is the devil."

"I run repeatedly, but never as I ran that day. At night I went out of town, and there was my own particular fire, quite distinct from the other, and burning, as though with even greater vigour."