

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Phoenix: Lt. Derby**

Because we recently wrote of the life in Monterey of Lt. George H. Derby, an actor at our California's First Theater, an officer in the Army stationed at the Presidio of Monterey before 1850, and one of the state's first humorists, we have been interested to read an article on early book trade in California, from 1856 to 1859.

There are three references to George H. Derby. One item from the offices of the Wide West Publishing Company announced "Books for the People," including John Payne Collier's edition of "Shakespeare," Michaud's "History of the Crusades," and George H. Derby's "Phoenixiana" as well as a large number of novels.

Kimbal's firm, known as "The Noisy Carrier's Publishing Hall," listed in the Wide West, paid for many inches of space in the "New Era," and in the daily newspapers.

In the San Francisco Bulletin of April 2, 1856, they listed books just received: Irving's "The Life of Washington," "The Confidential of Napoleon," and George Derby's "The Squibob Papers."

Each year during the 1850's the Society of Pioneers published its "Oration," commemorating the admission of the State to the union. Among the books by Californians published in New York were George Derby's "Phoenixiana" (1856) containing his Thurberish sketches from California periodicals, and now justifiably a collector's item.

An amusing article published May 25, 1856, told a story of a happening in which Lt. George H. Derby was concerned.

Aside from the fact that he was a great humorist of the early days and an engineer who surveyed much of the land in the city of Monterey, he wrote under the name of John Phoenix.

The item follows: "A couple of weeks ago we happened to meet Squibob John Phoenix, Amos Butterfield, et al; or more properly Lt. Derby, and by the way, a very fine, manly looking fellow he is.

"He seems all the time on the lookout for fun, and we verily believe he could not resist perpetrating a hoax at the expense of some poor devil, even if the author had but one week more to live.

"Phoenix was on the way to a printing office with a scrap of paper on which it was said that Madam Cassins, who explains the past and predicts the future, was about to prosecute Judge Crane, author of the 'Past, Present and Future of the Pacific', for interfering with her business.

"A friend tells the story of (?) and loving wit. One evening at the theater, Phoenix observed a man sitting three seats in front of him whom he thought he knew; he requested a stranger sitting next to him to punch the other individual with his cane.

"The polite stranger did so, and the disturbed person, turning his head a little, Derby discovered his mistake, that he was not the person he took him to be. Fixing his attention steadfastly on the play and affecting unconsciousness of the whole affair, he left the man with the cane to settle with the other for the disturbance, who had been wholly without an excuse.

"There was of course a ludicrous and embarrassing scene during all of which Phoenix was profoundly interested in the play. At last, the man with the cane asked rather indignantly, 'Didn't you tell me to punch the man with my stick?'

"Phoenix answered, 'Yes.' 'And what did you want?' Phoenix answered, 'Wanted to see if you would punch him!'"

That was humor in 1856.