

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 29, 1968

Early Days in the Gold Mine

Friedrich Gerstacker was born in Hamburg, in 1816, where he enjoyed a most extensive popularity as a novelist, and writer, of travels at home, as well as abroad. As an orphan at the age of 9, having an innate roving instinct in the eighth year after reading Robinson Crusoe.

By the time he was 21 years old he arrived in New York, having worked his way as a cabin boy. From that time on he traveled on foot over all parts of the United States, working as he went for a bare existence—as a fireman on a steamboat, deck hand, farmer, silversmith, wood cutter, merchant and hostler.

He also spent some time as a hunter and trapper in the Indian Territory before he settled in Arkansas where he stayed five years. He later returned to Germany after residing for a time in Louisiana.

Biobooks of Oakland, as part of the issues for the California Centennial of 1848-50, choose to publish Gerstacker's account of his travels and labors in the gold mines. He had received a grant, so one authority records, from the German government, and had accepted a position as correspondent for the *Augsburger Allegem*, so in 1849 he returned to America and California.

According to the late Judge Cosgrove of Fresno, who translated Gerstacker's "Life in California" from French into English, it was first printed in Germany, then translated and issued in England in 1854.

In the book "California Gold Mines" it is the opinion of historians, that the writer's description of the towns and the men of the period of the gold rush are unexcelled. He had a reporter's eye for character and a charming habit of recording the scenery and happenings of the time.

One of his descriptions of California scenery follows: "On Saturday, the 18th, we passed nearly the whole day through an uninterrupted flower garden; the country became more hilly, and shady groves, with clear and murmuring streams, were intersected by long open stretches covered with the most brilliant flowers imaginable, and even forming perfect drawing on the plain by the different kinds that grew together.

"Thus, principally under single trees, a bluebell had occupied the shady places, the deep running little water courses were marked on both sides by a broad lilac stripe of sweet-scented star-blossoms, and red and yellow varied in the picture almost regularly with the swelling and sinking of the soil.

Speaking German, Gerstacker carried messages and books to Capt. Sutter from his friends in Germany, according to Joseph A. Sullivan who wrote the preface for "California Gold Mines." And was personally acquainted with Weber, founders respectively of the thriving modern cities of Sacramento and Stockton.

In the State Library in Sacramento there is a photostat of Gov. Burnett's message to the first legislature recommending the start of California's Public Library System, but there is not a single book from the Sutter collection brought from Germany.

This must have been one of the earliest secular collections in the state. There were Spanish and Latin libraries in the missions and a few of these have survived. Much of the original library of Father Serra is now intact in Carmel Mission.

Gerstacker tells of meeting the German speaking ex-soldiers of Stevenson Regiment recruited in New York for the war with Mexico, and who were for a time stationed at the Presidio of Monterey. His description of the meeting is a source document in California's history and his interest in, and discussions of, the California Indians are a prime contribution to our knowledge of the times according to Sullivan.

"California Gold Mines" is dedicated by Boobooks to Jack London, for the reason that the publishers are reminded of the California writer in reading Gerstacker. "They had the same roaming feet, the similarity of the struggle for recognition, the flood of books, novels and reporting when the springs were released, although 50 years separated the two gold rushes, in Friedrich Gerstacker on the Sacramento and Jack London on the Yukon. Both admit a desperate need for gold."