

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

January 3, 1969

### Valuable Book

So grandmother left you an attic full of books and they're all more than a hundred years old and you're sure they're worth a fortune.

Well, maybe so.

But chances are they're in the dime a dozen class.

Old books are not as rare as a lot of people think, and, besides, age isn't the only determining factor where value is concerned.

For instance, San Jose antiques dealer Frank Perry recently traveled to Placerville to examine an estate containing 7,000 books published prior to 1870. He spent the whole day poring over volumes and came home without buying a single one.

"There just weren't any worth buying," he said.

A lot of people have probably taken one look at the condition of their children's library and wondered how any book has ever survived down through the ages. Surprisingly a lot of them have.

Some are of moderate to immense value. The vast majority are worthless. How is the average person to know?

There are some relatively simple guidelines, although in many specific cases only an expert can determine a book or magazine's true value.

"I get calls almost every day from people who have an old family Bible and they say, 'It's over a hundred years old. It must be very valuable,'" said Perry.

"I tell them to come on down to the shop and I'll sell them one a hundred years older for four dollars.

So there's one guideline. Old Bibles are practically worthless. So are old school texts. And generally this list of valueless books include poetry, religion and the law. A mint condition volume of Miller's "Death of a Salesman" is worth more than many hundred-year-old books.

What has value?

For one, first editions of good authors. Ernest Hemingway, for instance, sold a few years ago for \$15. The price is \$85 now.

For another, good illustrators. Many books and magazines are collectible now simply for their fine illustrations of old cars, fashions and the like. Old car ads sell for 50 cents for a single magazine page, \$1 for Model A illustrations.

Fine bindings are valuable regardless of the book's contents. These are usually used simply for decoration.

Almost anything on California or the West is eminently collectible and interest is definitely not limited to western collectors

Certain publishers, especially limited edition presses. These books often increase in value the moment they leave the press.

Certain university presses, the University of Oklahoma being the most notable example, are good bets.

American history in general – again no school texts.

The limited edition press is a good example of both its value and the value of Californiana. Talisman Press, formerly of Los Gatos and now located in the gold country, issued a limited edition of "The Life of Tiburcio Vasquez," the local bandit, some five years ago for \$5. Today it's worth \$25.

Civil War material, once highly valued, has diminished now in demand. Since the centennial (and the millions of words printed on the war between the states) Civil War stuff is a drug on the market," he said.

But virtually any Gold Rush publication is of value. An example is Louella Dickinson's "Reminiscences of a Trip Across the Plains," which sold for \$300 five years ago and is worth \$1,000 today.

"Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World," a history of Santa Clara Valley is worth \$100. "Illustrations of San Cruz County" sells for \$250, and one of the most striking examples of Californiana, "Del Norte County History," scales in at \$1,500.

As a general rule any book published before 1500 (the printing press was invented about 1440) is fairly valuable, and there are some other general rules. For example, 18<sup>th</sup> Century English books because America is a younger country.

Book club editions are largely valueless. These editions are identified on the dust jacket and if the dust cover is missing can be identified easily because they have a much less expensive cover and binding than regular editions.

Most modern first editions will say either that or first printing. The older first editions are more difficult to identify. They're for the expert.

The first edition of "The Wizard of Oz" is worth \$600.  
The second edition is valued at \$90.

The only difference is in the verse inside the back cover.  
There are only 11 lines in the first edition, 13 in the second. The distinction amounts to \$255 a line.