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Figure 1: *The First Street Bridge, Los Angeles, California, with damage and debris from the great flood of 1884. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.*

Disaster in Los Angeles, 1884

Brian Andrew Ebiner

Prologue

My great-great-grandfather, Samuel Aiken III, embodied the spirit of 19th century pioneering.[1] A self-made man, by sheer coincidence he was in Los Angeles when floods paralyzed the city in early 1884 (Figure 1). Samuel was born January 16, 1834 in West Barnet, Vermont. His mother died when he was two, his father left when he was seven, and then the orphaned Samuel was shuffled around to different caretakers. He was mistreated, and at least once, ran away. When he was ten, a kind family emigrating west to Illinois invited Samuel to come along, and he seized this opportunity. They taught him the joys of arduous farm work, and

(*Continued on Page 3*)

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Editor's Corner . . .

Welcome to the L.A. Westerners' Spring, 2017 "disaster" edition of *The Branding Iron*. New contributer Brian Ebiner brings to us this issue's lead article on his ancestor's catastrophically-timed visit to Los Angeles during the great flood of 1884. Abe Hoffman offers another tale of destruction, this time of the Coalinga earthquake nearly a hundred years later in 1983.

Yet not all disasters need be entirely bad. Sheriff Brian Dillon writes of the emergence of the bikini from the ashes of WWII, and living legend Monsignor Weber relates how a rat epidemic in early California forced the surrender of Spanish friars and all generations since to our loveable feline overlords.

To follow are accounts of the monthly Roundups by yours truly, and a book review by Sheriff Dillon.

Many thanks to the authors who have helped bring Western history alive in this issue. Please contact me with your ideas if you want to contribute to *The Branding Iron*.

Happy Trails!

John Dillon
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how to improve his reading and writing. He developed a voracious appetite for learning and for labor, which drove him throughout his life. At sixteen, concealing his true age, he began teaching in rural Indiana, and since he had no home, boarded with the families of his students. At eighteen he bought his first farm in Wisconsin, then, at nineteen, married the love of his life.

For the rest of his life, Samuel created opportunities, served the public, risked entrepreneurships, and built strong family ties. Mostly self-taught, and primarily a farmer, he also served his communities as a teacher (in three states), Justice of the Peace, County Treasurer, and State Legislator. He was a reporter, social reformer, unpublished poet, and late in life he invented a method of breeding large, heavy, Holstein milk cows that produced exceptional cream. Between 1881 and 1883, his livestock won blue ribbon awards, prize-money, and fame at state fairs in Nebraska, Illinois, and Minnesota, as well as county fairs in Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota. By all accounts, he was perfectly content working his land, breeding his cattle, and making it on his own in the country. Aiken (Figure 2) expressed his joy as an agriculturalist in his poem, *Farmer's Song:*

Let those who like the city's din
The crowded thoroughfare,
The dark abode of folly and sin,
The strife, the glitter and glare.

Let the votaries of fashion and wealth
Offer at vanity's shrine,
Happiness, comfort, freedom, and health
For vain show and the dross of the mine;

But give me a home in a quiet spot,
In the country fair and free,
Nor will I complain of my humble lot,
Oh, a home on the farm for me.

The reward of my toil is plenty and health
And though the "dimes" are few,
I have contentment - the best of wealth,
And true friends who are good and true.
Then give me a home in a tranquil spot,
In the country pleasant and free,
And I'll never repine at my humble lot,
Oh, a home on the farm for me![2]

Off to Los Angeles

Samuel's farm was flourishing, but his health was failing. Unbeknownst to him, a cancer was developing in the pyloric orifice of his stomach. Decorah, Iowa winters are brutally cold, and his doctor thought that dry, mild weather would aid his recovery. Los Angeles, known for its healthy climate, was an obvious choice. So, on Thursday, January 24, 1884, Samuel said his goodbyes to his beloved wife and children and traveled solo, first to St. Louis, and then by steamboat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans.[3] Next, he rode west on the Southern Pacific Railroad's "Sunset Route" just completed the previous year, passing through San Antonio, El Paso, Casa Grande, and hundreds of miles of desolate desert.

Angeleños were experiencing a dry season until late January, when rain began falling almost daily. As Aiken neared Los Angeles on February 6, the weather was chilly - the mercury had peaked at 56 degrees - and a cool rain was falling intermittently. His train was delayed an hour, arriving in Los Angeles at about 5:45 pm.[4] Samuel checked into the Cosmopolitan Hotel (Figure 3) on 47 Main Street in the busiest, most central part of Los Angeles.[5] This hotel offered a free coach ride from the train depot, and Southern Pacific operated a transfer office inside the hotel. One of the nicest hotels in Los Angeles, it was most likely more impressive than any hotel Samuel had ever stayed in. There were private hot and cold baths, rooms for 300 guests, and a reading room open both day and night. There was new furniture, and daily meals were prepared. Rates ranged from $2.00 to $3.00 per day. The famed Pico House, built in the 1860s and still standing today, serves as an excellent reference point.[6] It stood at the end of the downtown near the Plaza. Decades later, everything south of the Pico House building was razed. The Cosmopolitan, formerly known as Lafayette,

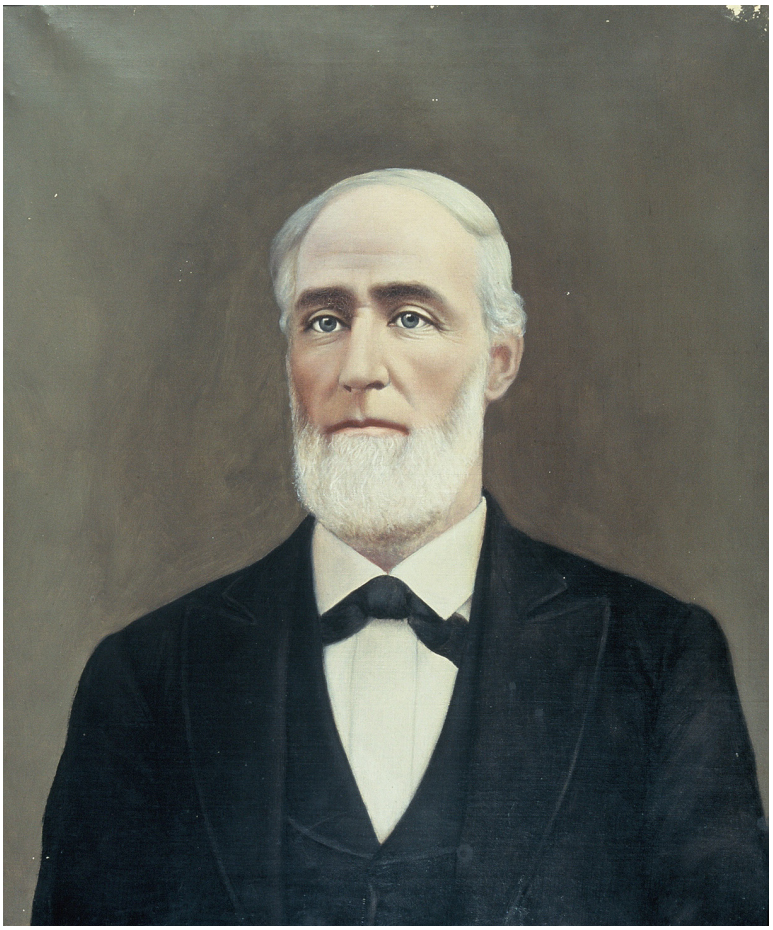

Figure 2: *Portrait, circa 1880, of Samuel Aiken III (1834-1885). Ebiner collection.*

and later St. Elmo's Hotel, was located on the opposite side of the street from the Pico House, but eight buildings south (Figure 4). For over half a century this was Los Angeles' vibrant, centralized block for business, government, and elegant hotels.

In February, 1884, Los Angeles' unpaved, dirt streets had sidewalks, curbs, and gutters but its drainage system was primitive. Only the most well-traveled streets, a mere fifteen of them, had sewers running below their surface via riveted iron pipes. Water was still channeled throughout the city through the old *zanja* system of open ditches and brick-laid channels. The previous summer the *Daily Los Angeles Herald* advocated the building of a levee near First Street, but this had not been done.[7] East of town ran the natural course of the normally dry Los Angeles "River." Electric lights, still a novelty, had recently been erected on major streets on gigantic poles up to three hundred feet tall illuminating with 3,000 candle-power. "Los Angeles has, and probably deserves, the reputation of being the best lighted city to be found anywhere," claimed the *Herald*.[8] Obviously, city lighting could not slow flooding, but it would aid in recovery.

Aiken Arrives with the Rain

The weather was not what Samuel nor his doctor had hoped for, but he was fortunate to arrive when he did; many trains were cancelled. Rain was falling, streams were swelling, bridges were weakening, and some tracks were submerged. "The railway track between Downey City and Anaheim is still out of repair. Trains run only from Los Angeles to Downey city and return," the *Herald* reported.[9] In addition, the railway between Los Angeles and Santa Ana was under water and trains had been at an impasse for twenty-four hours.

Rain continued to fall and the city's streets began to flood. The drainage system

could not handle the heavy runoff, and the saturated streets turned to muck. In an attempt to remedy the problem, the superintendent of streets cleared the gutter on the corner of Spring Street and Temple Streets. This "relieved the overcharged sewer running under Main Street" and channeled water to Spring Street, while protecting cellars on the east side of Main Street.[10] But this was only a temporary relief. Meanwhile, in Coldwater Canyon, "the torrent was so great that it swept soil, sand, boulders, houses, and corrals with such force as to tear down board fences miles away where no stream was ever known to run before."[11] Such was the weather for the first two days of Samuel's stay. Unbeknownst to him, this was only the beginning of one of the greatest storm surges in Los Angeles' history, setting all-time records for the most rain in a single season.[12]

The early rains of 1884 had been inconvenient, but the ensuing storms were deadly and destructive. On Sunday, February 17, a blistering storm slammed into an already saturated Los Angeles. The Los Angeles River swelled and began cutting new channels. It was raining all day and at 3 p.m. the Aliso Street Bridge broke in two. A portion of the bridge was pushed down river and lodged against the First Street Bridge. Six houses near the river were washed down the freshet and they jammed against the First Street Bridge. Now, there was an unintentional dam. The water rose, the river overflowed its banks and flooded Macy Street. Next, pressure from the Aliso bridge, the half dozen houses jammed against it and the rising water was too much for the First Street Bridge. It collapsed at 6 pm, causing its west bank to erode. A channel of water now rushed out of the old bed of the river, cutting its own destructive new course. Next, "about thirty-five or forty houses were undermined and carried down [the] freshet. All at once, great waves began to roll."[13] The *Herald* began its report with, "The Seventeenth Day of February will long be Memorable in the Annals of Los Angeles County," and summed up the catastrophe that had put "a third of the city under water for hours:"

> The spectacle was dreadful along the riverbed; parts of houses, beds, bedsteads, bureaus, cradles, baby wagons, doors, cupboards, fences, gates, tubs, pails, brooms, chickens, pigs, horses, orange trees and almost everything pertaining to a household that could be indulged to float was to be seen along the river side.[14]

The flood swept away houses, livestock, and drowned at least four people. A milkman got caught in the freshet and drowned in the Arroyo Seco. Meanwhile, the J. F. Fischer family, while seeking refuge in their house, was swept away with their house and drowned.[15] The entire region between Cerritos, Los Alamitos and San Pedro was covered with water, and "El Monte was largely under water."[16] Rancher George Carson's nine hundred sheep drowned in the flood. Orchards, vineyards, wagon roads, railroads, hillsides, farmland, and at least 70 houses and ninety lots were washed away.

Thousands of people pulled together in rescue efforts. "Relief wagons and lumber for rafts was sent from Santa Ana."[17] Men built levees and placed countless sandbags to stop or divert water. Several fundraisers, from piano raffles to concerts and shows raised funds for the victims. The Cosmopolitan Hotel offered its dining room to the homeless and displaced. Samuel wrote a letter back home, noting the disrupted train schedules and impassable roads, stating that it was "worse than a [Midwestern] snow blockade."[18]

The Lull Before the Second Storm

Late February saw at least a week of mild weather, with temperatures in the 70s. When the rain subsided, Samuel took walks and admired the wondrous views. With characteristic enthusiasm, he exclaimed:

> You will see a thousand sights to charm a person from the north. Orange groves bending under their loads of beautiful yellow fruit, as well as lemons and other citrus fruits, and all the same time, some of them already full of fragrant blossoms of the coming crop—

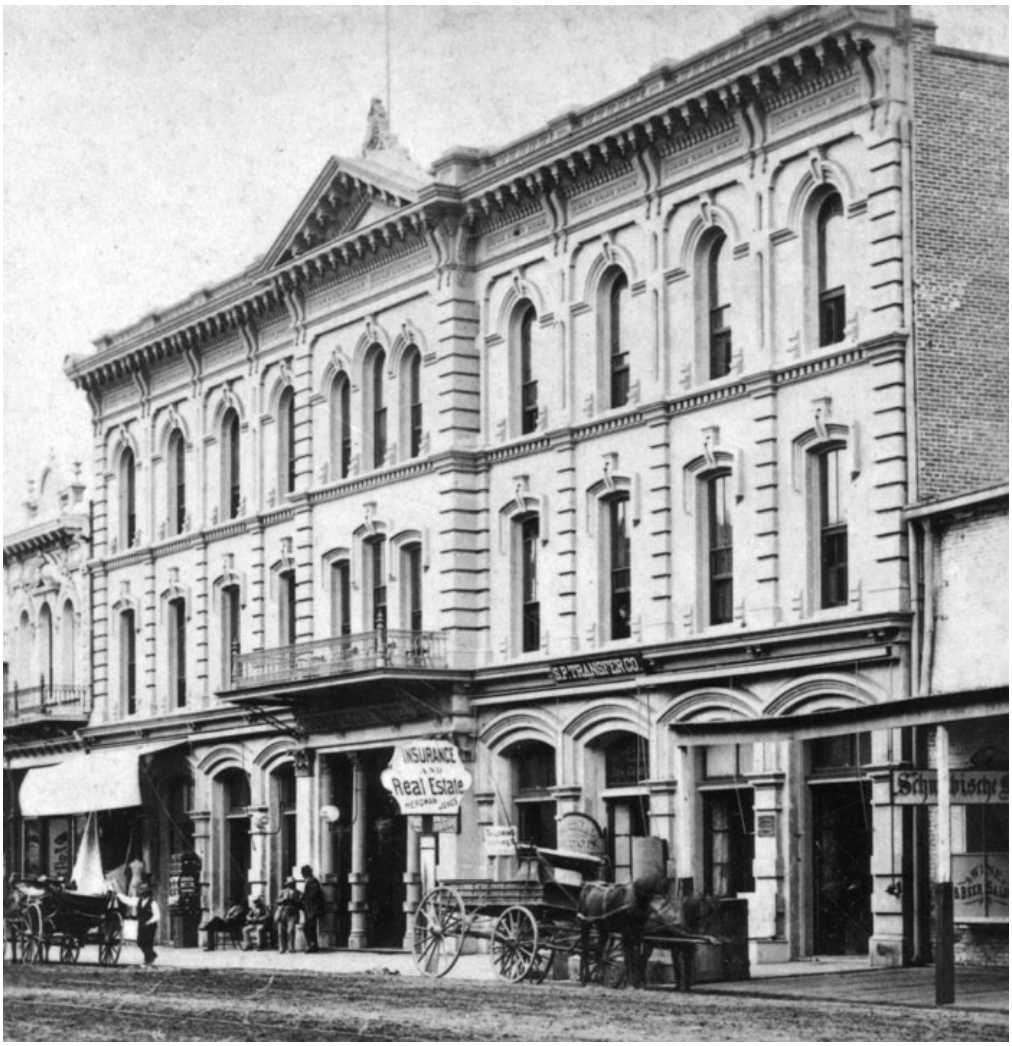

Figure 3: *The Cosmopolitan Hotel on Main Street, Los Angeles, California, in the 1880s. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.*

> peach trees and some deciduous fruits in full bloom. Then who can describe the wonderful beauty and profusion of flowers. [He called the Pepper tree]...the most beautiful shade and ornamental tree I ever saw—a thing of beauty and joy forever.[19]

Although Samuel appreciated the natural beauty of Los Angeles, he was less impressed with soaring prices, much higher than what he was accustomed to in Decorah. He explained, "Prices of board, and all kinds of services are about double what they are in Iowa."[20] He had traveled not as a tourist, but to reclaim his health. Samuel found a Los Angeles doctor, reluctantly paid $2.50 for a visit, but felt he was being exploited, for, as he sadly wrote:

> The doctors are very numerous and reap a rich harvest. There are but two classes here—the skinners, and the skinned...The poor pilgrims who come here seeking health are the worst skinned.[21]

Indeed, he was a "pilgrim" himself. Samuel, a successful veteran farmer, recognized the awesome potential of farmland, but the prices were overwhelming. "Where water can be had, wonderful results are obtained in the raising of all kinds of fruit and vegetables. Orange trees have to be propped to keep them from breaking under their loads of fruit. All kinds of fruit are successfully raised…" Samuel went on and on praising the potential. Yet he conceded, "but when one counts the cost it is likely

to dampen his enthusiasm," he explained. "One must pay a big price for the land, and a bigger price for the air and water!"[22] In the 1850s Samuel had purchased hundreds of unimproved acres in Minnesota for $1.25 an acre. Now he was witnessing astronomical prices: "Unimproved land, with a limited water right is worth from $200 to $400 per acre…" No wonder Los Angeles prices left him bewildered:

> I can see nothing in the country around or in the city itself, to warrant such prices...The great drawback to Southern California is the certainty of a lack of rain and the danger of occasionally having too much. This would be perhaps the finest country on earth for agricultural and horticultural purposes, provided the supply of water was ample and uniform.[23]

Unlike Midwestern farming, arduous work was not enough. One had to have abundant money just to get started:

> Those choice lands where water can be procured will always be valuable and will support wealth and intelligent communities, and will be pleasant homes for such as have *ample* means; but they seem to be...poor places...for a *poor man* to make a home, who is dependent on his own labor.

Samuel never imagined Los Angeles would grow so immense given its natural limitations. Thinking as a farmer, with no familiarity with the semi-arid West, he expostulated:

> Corn cannot be profitably raised; there are no tame grasses without irrigation; the certainty of long continued droughts and the liability to destructive floods, the scarcity of wood, and entire want of coal…nearly worthless mountains and deserts renders much of the country incapable of supporting a permanent population.[24]

Despite his poor health and lack of mobility, and, especially, Los Angeles' discouraging prices, he kept a cheerful disposition:

> To look at this valley [the Los Angeles plain] now, from the hills, smiling in all the freshness and beauty of a semi-tropical spring, and framed on either side with ranges of rugged mountains, whose highest peaks are covered with snow, one is ready to exclaim, 'A land more fair by mortal eyes was never seen!'[25]

The mild climate supported flowers unimaginable in Decorah. Samuel was in awe, and in exquisite detail he contrasted all he admired locally with those of Decorah:

> The ladies of Decorah, who work so hard to keep life in a few sickly plants through our long winters, would feel discouraged after seeing Geraniums fully ten feet high growing along the fences and blazing with flowers. Beautiful roses of all kinds, some of them climbing higher than the second stories of houses; calla lilies everywhere, full of perfect blossoms all winter.[26]

Los Angeles had nearly ten times the population of Decorah, and Samuel marveled at the vast number of buildings, roads, and construction. Federal censuses are taken only once each decade, but the *Daily Los Angeles Herald* on January 6, 1884, wrote, "The population of your city is estimated to have increased from about 17,000 to 25,000 since 1881, and still they come."[27] People got around by foot, wagon, horse, hackney, or street car, which was pulled by horses or mules along a double track of rails. Day trips to agricultural colonies were advertised—often with the hopes of enticing one to purchase land. Samuel rode a hackney on a day trip to Pasadena. The four-horse hackney left Los Angeles at 9:30 am, arrived in Pasadena at 11:30 am, and returned at 3:30 pm. Samuel checked out the place and wrote:

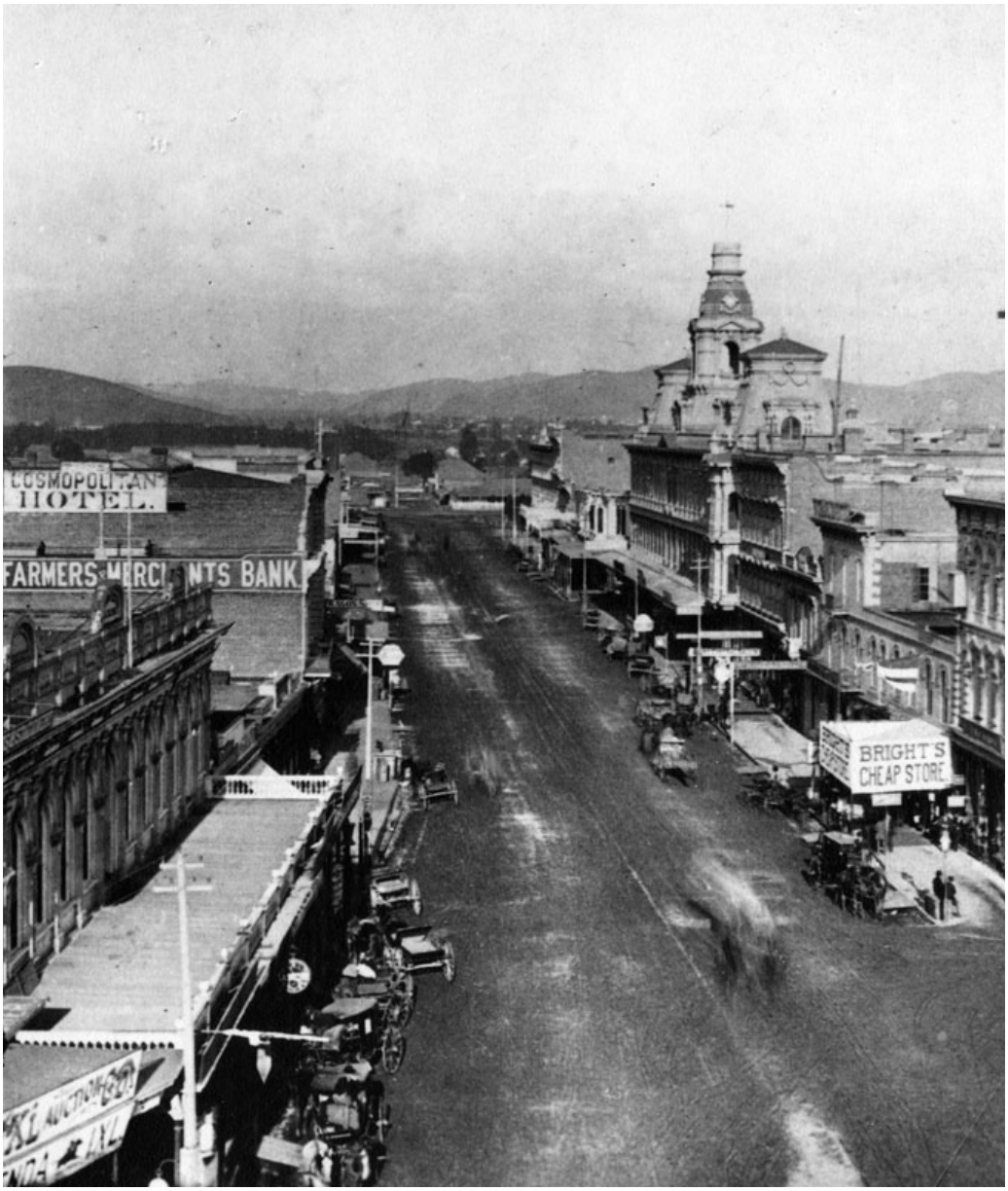

Figure 4: *Main Street, Los Angeles, looking north, circa 1883, a year before the great flood. Note the Cosmopolitan Hotel at left, the Pico House and Merced Theater across the street and down the block at right. Of all the impressive buildings seen in the photo, only the Pico House remains today. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.*

Such settlements as Pasadena are very desirable places to live in, but, like most other desirable places in California, very expensive.[28]

The Great Los Angeles Flood of 1884

After late February's mild weather, mother nature released her fury once again the following month, punishing the city with its wettest March on record. February storms dropped 13.37 inches of rain, wreaking havoc and suffering. During a normal March Los Angeles rainfall averages only 3.14 inches, but 1884's deluge delivered 12.36—and most of that from the 3rd through 9th.[29] With it came more flooding, vineyard and orchard washouts, lost livestock, and at least two people, cowboys, who had just delivered cattle to Los Angeles, drowned in the Santa Clara River.[30] The city was paralyzed by rain. "For the *whole month of March*, railroad communication was cut off!" reported the *Herald*.[31] "*Every* bridge over the Los Angeles

River was taken out…The bridges on the San Gabriel and Santa Ana Rivers were (also) washed out," cried the *Herald*.[32] With the bridges over these three rivers gone, it was impossible to move much of anything. Furthermore, some tracks slid out and others were submerged. The San Fernando train tunnel collapsed, and rail travelers began to get impatient. Unbelievably mucky roads were everywhere, and suddenly steamships were in great demand.

Meanwhile, Samuel gradually surrendered his hopes of improving his health in Los Angeles. His strength and hopes had further deteriorated. On March 14, 1884, he wrote:

> Disastrous floods have been caused by these excessive rains, in connection with the melting snows on the mountains. Immense damage has been done to railroads; over one hundred houses swept away in Los Angeles; thousands of acres of soil washed away and land covered with sand and debris. Orchards and crops destroyed and the *end is not yet*. The trains have been suspended on the Southern Pacific, *nearly all the time* I have been here.[33]

By the end of the 1883-1884 rainy season, 38.18 inches of rain had fallen in downtown Los Angeles, all but a fraction of the 1884 calendar year's total of just over 40 inches.[34] This was the greatest rainfall since the city began keeping records in 1877. Compounding the problem, drainage was poor, completely unequal to the deluge, streets were unpaved, and the natural banks of the Los Angeles River were sandy, easily eroded, and unreinforced.

Escape to San Francisco, Then Home to Iowa

Unable to escape the relentless rain via rail, Samuel abandoned his hopes of a dry Los Angeles and bought a steamship ticket. On March 19, he boarded the steamship *Ancon* for San Francisco and sailed at 1 pm.[35] He paid for basic accommodations to avoid the miserable and uncomfortable steerage section that 31 other people, desperate to leave Los Angeles, endured. Besides passengers, the *Ancon* carried all sorts of desired goods and livestock on this run including: peas from San Pedro, beans from Santa Barbara, and 335 foul-smelling sheep from the port of San Luis Obispo. Ironically, the weather cleared and some southern railroads resumed running for short stretches the same day Samuel left by sea. There was great joy throughout the city. San Francisco's *Daily Alta* shouted, "Travel Resumed. The Southern Pacific Temporarily Repaired. A Feeling of Rejoicing" while the *Daily Los Angeles Herald* celebrated:[36]

> The railroads are temporarily repaired and the first trains are moving east and north. The blockade has been long and tedious…but now that the cause of our woe is removed, we all feel better…The trains are moving very cautiously over the injured portions of the track…The number of delayed passengers is very large, and the amount of mail and express matter is immense.[37]

Samuel disembarked on San Francisco's Broadway Wharf on March 21. His whereabouts are unknown for the next four weeks. Then, *The Daily Alta* reported on April 23 that he had arrived at the magnificent, gingerbread-style Grand Hotel on Market Street, one of the finest hotels on the West Coast.[38] He stayed briefly and then checked out. His body was weakening and perhaps he sought medical treatment. Samuel then checked back into the Grand Hotel on April 28. This luxurious hotel sold Southern Pacific overland train tickets on the first floor and across the street at the Palace Hotel there was a railroad office.[39] This was quite a convenience for an ailing man who needed a train ticket back home.

In early May Samuel journeyed by rail for about 98 hours back to Council Bluffs, Iowa. His "overland" route would have taken him along the tracks of the Transcontinental Railroad. Near certain, he rode from San Francisco to Sacramento via Southern Pacific, and then on the Central Pacific over the

majestic Sierra Nevada's and Donner Summit, to Reno, past Promontory Summit, Cheyenne, and Omaha and back into Iowa. Along the way, majestic mountains, magnificent picturesque views, and seemingly endless plains would have been welcome sights. On May 7, 1884 he arrived home exhausted and weak. Los Angeles had suffered a great natural disaster, but Samuel Aikens had also endured his own personal one as well. He had spent large sums of money, had been isolated for weeks far from his precious family, and rather than improving, his health had greatly declined. Samuel had traded a cold, snowy, Decorah winter for a wet, stormy Los Angeles one. Instead of improving, his health, unfortunately, had deteriorated. The *Decorah Republican* stated, "Samuel Aiken arrived home last Wednesday, …He became very ill, and his present condition is one of recovery."[40]

Epilogue

Aiken kept trying to regain his health. He offered his entire herd for sale, and six months after his return to Iowa, hoping to avoid the frigid Midwestern Winter, traveled again to California. This time he took his wife and ten-year-old daughter, not to Los Angeles, but San José. The doctors there, unfortunately, explained that there was no hope for him. So, the Aikens turned around, traveled the overland route once again, and arrived home on a bitterly-cold Christmas Eve. Hearing the sweet song of a robin in the spring was Samuel's last wish. Samuel Aiken III pondered his own impending mortality when he penned *Bury Me:*

Bury me not, when I am dead,
In the graveyard dreary and lone,
Where the feet of the careless stranger tread,
And naught but dead grass over my head,
Or the monumental stone.

Bury me not, when I am no more,
On the prairie cold and drear,
Where howls the wolf, and the tempests roar,
And naught but dead grass wavering o'er,
And nothing the scene to cheer.

Bury me not, when I am at rest,
In the ocean's fathomless deep,
Where the foam-capped wave shall rear its crest
High over my head, while over my breast
The mountainous billows sweep.

Bury me not, when I shall die,
On the mountain rugged and bare,
That rears its snow-crowned from on high,
Where the howling tempest rushes by,
And the wild beast makes his lair.

But bury me, when I am gone,
In a green and woody dell,
Where murmuring stream glides gently on,
And the feathered songsters at the dawn,
Their sad, sweet matins tell
Ah, bury me when I am dead,
Where the rose and the violet bloom,
Where flowers and trees shall wave o'er my head,
Where perchance, some true friend may weep o'er my bed,
Where no ruthless stranger may come.[41]

On April 14, 1885 Samuel Aiken did indeed hear the robin sing, for the final time. The following day, in his home, surrounded by his family, he died. Samuel was buried directly behind his farm in the shade of several mature trees, in what is now called Phelps Cemetery.

Notes

1: Samuel Aiken III Biography: Ebiner, 2010.
2: Aiken's "Farmer's Song:" Ebiner, 2010, p. 119.
3: Aiken Heads Down the Mississippi: Decorah Republican, 1884a.
4: Aiken Arrives in Los Angeles: *Daily Los Angeles Herald* 1884b.
5: The Cosmopolitan Hotel: was later renumbered as part of the 300 block.
6: The Pico House: now renumbered as 424 N Main Street, is California State Historic Landmark No. 159. As a National Historic Landmark it is also part of the *Plaza de Los Angeles* Historic District.
7: Protective Levee Never Built: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884f.
8: Los Angeles "The Best Lighted City:" *Daily Los Angeles Herald,* 1884b.
9: Railroad Tracks Submerged: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884b.

10: Water Flowing Through the Streets of Los Angeles: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884b.
11: Flooding in Coldwater Canyon: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884b.
12: An Earlier, Even Worse, Los Angeles Flood: Only dimly-remembered by just a few of the town's oldest residents at the time of Aiken's visit were the much worse floods of 1833. These were so extreme that the lower Los Angeles River changed its old course, from what is now called Ballona Creek, to its present course past Wilmington and into San Pedro Bay, on the opposite side of the Palos Verdes Peninsula.
13: Houses Washed Away: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884c.
14: A Dreadful Spectacle Along the Riverbed: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884c.
15: Catastrophic Loss of Life and Property: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884d.
16: El Monte Under Water: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884c.
17: Relief Wagons Sent From Santa Ana: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884c.
18: Aiken's "Flood Letter" Back Home to Iowa Published: *Decorah Republican*, 1884b.
19: Aiken on Los Angeles Pepper Trees: Decorah Republican, 1884b.
20: Los Angeles Prices Double those in Iowa: Decorah Republican, 1884b.
21: "Skinning the Pilgrims:" Decorah Republican, 1884b.
22: The High Cost of Agricultural Ventures in Los Angeles: Decorah Republican, 1884b.
23: The "Finest Country on Earth for Agriculture:" *Decorah Republican*, 1884b.
24: Aiken Misreads Southern California's Agricultural Potential: Corn, *Zea mays*, was, of course, the very first domestic crop raised in California. It was introduced from Mexico and planted at every one of the eventual 21 missions, and at many of the mission *asistencias* as well. And, Los Angeles, as the Queen of the California Cow Counties, never needed "tame grass" with which to feed its hundreds of thousands of cattle, in herds which would have put any Midwestern bovine congregations, such as those from Iowa, to shame.
25: "A Land More Fair Was Never Seen:" *Decorah Republican*, 1884c.
26: Los Angeles Flowers "Beautiful" vs. Iowa ones "Sickly:" Decorah Republican, 1884c.
27: Los Angeles Population "Boom:" *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884a.
28: Pasadena "Very Expensive:" *Decorah Republican*, 1884b.
29: Record-Breaking Rainfall: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1889.
30: Cowboys Drown in Santa Clara River: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884e.
31: Railroad Communication Cut Off: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1889.
32: All Bridges Washed Out: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1889.
33: Aiken Letter of March 14, 1884: Ebiner, 2010.
34: Most Rain On Record: *Decorah Republican*, 1884d. Yearly precipitation records were recorded by "rain season" from July 1st to June 30th of the following year.
35: Aiken Takes Ship for San Francisco: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884f; *Daily Alta California*, 1884a
36: Southern Pacific Service Temporarily Restored: *Daily Alta California*, 1884b.
37: Trains Now Moving Very Cautiously: *Daily Los Angeles Herald*, 1884f.
38: Aiken Rooms at San Francisco's Grand Hotel: *Daily Alta California*, 1884c.
39: Aiken Buys his Ticket Home: *Daily Alta California*, 1884d.
40: Samuel Aiken "Very Ill:" *Decorah Republican*, 1884d.
41: Aiken's "Bury Me" Farewell Poem: Ebiner, 2010, p. 168.

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1884a: March 20
1884b: March 23
1884b: April 20
1884c: April 29

Daily Los Angeles Herald [Newspaper]
1884a: January 6
1884b: February 7
1884c: February 19
1884d: February 20
1884e: March 15
1884f: March 20
1889: December 27

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1884a: January 31
1884b: March 31
1884c: April 7
1884d: May 12

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The 1983 Coalinga Earthquake

Abraham Hoffman

Located fifty miles southwest of Fresno in the San Joaquin Valley, the town of Coalinga, population 7,000 in 1980 but almost doubled by 2016, is an economic center serving ranching and oil production. It's also the home of West Hills Community College, the flagship school for an expanding community college district in Fresno County. Travelers along Interstate-5 ten miles to the east of Coalinga find the Harris Ranch, an oasis offering a restaurant, gift shop, motel, and an opportunity to purchase Harris Ranch beef, especially steaks. Further north, travelers experience at first hand the source of Harris Ranch beef—huge fenced-in feed lots with large numbers of cattle awaiting their fate.

For Coalinga residents, fate came in the form of an earthquake with magnitude 6.2-6.5 at 4:42 p.m. on May 2, 1983. The quake surprised both Coalinga residents and seismologists as a previously unknown fault was its cause. Avenal, a small town with a population of 4,200 at the time, experienced similar damage. Fortunately, no one was killed. Ninety-four people were injured. "It could have been an enormous disaster, with millions of dollars in damage," observed Ken Maley of the state's Governor's earthquake preparedness task force.

As had happened in other cities and towns in California, the quake's most extensive damage was to older buildings in the Coalinga downtown business district. Chimneys were special victims throughout the town. It didn't matter if residences were old or new; the quake knocked chimneys down in every neighborhood.

The earthquake affected young and old alike. Fifteen-year-old Ray Hedgecock was in a stereo store looking at audiocassettes when the earthquake hit. His bicycle, parked outside the store, was buried under a pile of bricks. "All you could hear was the ground rumbling," he recalled. "There was so much dust you couldn't even see across the street." Veda Cooper, age 79, "was standing in the kitchen doorway when everything started falling down. I couldn't get backward and I couldn't get forward. It felt like the house was going to come falling down. But I couldn't get out and run. I'm crippled. Everything that could fall fell. Jams and jellies, pickles, clothes, suitcases, goblets and glasses, a whole set of china for 12—everything was all mixed together. Water was squirting all over the bathroom."

Only a week before, the Coalinga Ward Welfare Committee of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints had held an emergency preparedness training seminar. Bishop Fowkes, a professor of geology as well as a church leader, presided over the seminar that simulated an earthquake as its disaster of choice. "It's not very likely that we'll see a major earthquake in Coalinga," he remarked, citing the town's distance from the San Andreas fault, "but we'll go ahead with this exercise and come up with a plan anyway." The preparations they made paid off much sooner than anyone expected.

A U.S. Geological Survey report stated, "Earthquake damage in Coalinga clearly demonstrated the marked difference in response of the various types of structures prevalent in central California to strong horizontal earthquake shaking. Those that fared worst were the oldest unreinforced-masonry structures in the central business district. Other types of structures that were seriously damaged were adobe buildings and wood-frame houses on cripple walls [a wall built between an exterior foundation and the first floor, creating a crawl space; such houses are vulnerable to serious damage during an earthquake]. In contrast, many buildings in Coalinga built during the past 50 years performed very well; these buildings included substantial public structures, such as public schools and college buildings. Certain types of privately owned buildings with wood or steel frames also performed well; many of these structures sustained only minor or no damage." The Bank of America and Guarantee Savings and Loan buildings, of recent

Above: *Coalinga, failed second-story wall of a building in restricted area of heavily damaged downtown. Photo courtesy of the United States Geological Survey.*

construction, were only slightly damaged.

The California Seismic Safety Commission (renamed the Alfred E. Alquist Seismic Safety Commission in 2006) conducted an investigation into the cause of the quake and aided the town in planning its reconstruction. Although Coalinga dodged the bullet of a major tragedy, geologists and seismologists expressed concern over the fact that the quake was due to an undisclosed fault.

Jim Watkins, an official with the California Office of Emergency Services, urged Californians to see the Coalinga quake as an example of what could happen elsewhere in the state. "We know we're going to have earthquakes like this—and more serious ones—and we've got to keep using disasters like this to learn how to deal with them in the future," he said. As an example, he cited the fact that the Red Cross had provided four shelters for people whose homes were damaged, but only nineteen people went to them. On the other hand, some 500 came for breakfast. It seemed that most people wanted to stay near their homes, to the extent of sleeping in their automobiles or even on their front lawns. "I think we learned that providing shelter is less important than providing meals," said Watkins.

"The rumbling from California's Coalinga earthquake May 2 has stopped but serious scientific reverberations continue," reported Sandra Blakeslee in the New York Times. "They now indicate to geologists that the state is in even worse seismological condition than had been thought. Not only has the pace of earthquake activity actually quickened but it can stem, as at Coalinga, from unknown faults capable of damaging whole towns."

For several years prior to the Coalinga quake the U.S. Geological Survey had been conducting an "earthquake watch." The Survey expressed concern that the Coalinga quake might be a foreshock anticipating a cataclysmic event such as the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Seismologists in California felt the same way. Caltech seismologist Kate Hutton said that "we knew the faults were there but we didn't think

they were prime candidates. We've had a disappointing history of determining which faults are the most dangerous."

A 5.7 quake had occurred near Oroville in northern California in 1975, and a 5.5 took place off the coast of Santa Barbara in 1978. There was also the recent volcanic eruption of Mt. St. Helens in Washington in 1980 that caused quakes. "Immediately after the Coalinga earthquake," reported Blakeslee, "critics of California's nuclear industry raised the issue of whether any place is safe for building power plants, given that major faults can lie hidden."

More than 900 active oil wells were in the Coalinga area. When the quake hit, 26 of them were seriously damaged, and Shell Oil cut electric power to the facilities. Damage occurred to oil tanks and pumping units, and while the pipelines held up well, they had numerous leaks. Service roads buckled and cracked. Coalinga had been producing oil for decades; the quake temporarily stopped production.

For a town a century old, Coalinga today has little architectural history for visitors to see. Instead, more than twenty historical markers and plaques offer pictures to show what was once there but destroyed or razed because of the 1983 earthquake. The town's Lions' Club erected the markers. Visitors wanting to know more about the quake will find information at the R.C. Baker Memorial Museum.

Was the Coalinga earthquake a portent of a major earthquake in the near future? Geologists and seismologists could only speculate, keeping tabs on areas, especially in southern California, where the San Andreas Fault prompted "earthquake watch" monitoring. U.S. Geological Survey geophysicist Allan Lindh admitted that predicting earthquakes was "like using results at a racetrack to pick the stock market. You might win, but you'd better not bet the farm on it." He gave the opinion—just an opinion—that the Parkfield area, with a history of big quakes, might be the next target for the San Andreas Fault. Then again, he wasn't betting any farms, for the next quake of note took place not at Parkfield, around twenty miles south of Coalinga, but at Whittier, more than 200 miles to the south.

Birth of the Bikini: 1945

Brian D. Dillon

Ever since the *Birth of the Bikini*, less has been more. In 1967 every red-blooded American youth had the image of Raquel Welch as a cave-woman in a rabbit-skin bikini indelibly burned into his psyche. Fifty years and two generations later, today's young men, even those born without the "sports gene" still eagerly await the annual (since 1964) *Sports Illustrated* "swimsuit issue," in order to evaluate the latest beach fashions sported by the opposite sex.

The first public viewing of the "bikini" is said to have been at the popular *Piscine Molitor*, a Paris swimming pool. The new swimming costume was represented, on July 5, 1946, as the creation of a French engineer, Louis Reard. Reard gave his design the same name, "Bikini," as the Micronesian atoll the Americans had detonated an Atomic Bomb over just four days earlier. The Atomic test, and shortly afterwards the *Bikini*, made the front pages of newspapers around the world. Reard's "bikini model" was Micheline Bernardini. Taking a break from her *daily grind* as a nude dancer, when Bernardini put on Reard's bikini, she was, in fact, "covering up" instead of the reverse.

Two recently-discovered 1945 photographs (Figure 1) in my late father's archive reveal that Reard stole his idea from beach babes on the Basque Coast who had been wearing "bikinis" for more than a year by the time he announced his "invention." My father (Figure 2), a wounded combat veteran enrolled at the just-created, all-G.I. *Biarritz American University*, asked the girls on that Atlantic beach, in his halting French, why they were wearing next to nothing that

Figure 1 (Left): *One of the earliest iterations of the world-famous Bikini. This photo was taken on the beach at Saint Jean de Luz, near Biarritz, on the French Basque Coast, in August, 1945. This was just under a year before the "Bikini" was introduced in Paris with great fanfare, and the name was coined. The photographer was my father, twenty-one-year-old U.S. Army combat veteran Richard H. Dillon. On that beach near the Spanish border he knew that history was being made, and responded accordingly. Dad photographically recorded what he called "French girls prancing around in their underwear" with the Leica camera he had liberated from the smoking ruins of Hitler's Germany only three months earlier.*

Figure 2 (Right): *Private Richard H. Dillon, Weapons Platoon, "Love" Company, 315th Infantry Regiment, 79th Division, at the time of his release from the U.S. Army hospital at Aix en Provence, France, in December, 1944. My father had been badly wounded during the fierce fighting in Lorraine in October, and spent three months in the hospital before being sent back to his unit. He fought and served in France, Belgium, Holland, Germany and Czechoslovakia, before enrolling at the all-G.I. Biarritz American University in early August, 1945, three months after VE-Day.*

Summer of 1945. The *Mam'sels* told him that they were celebrating the *liberation* of France from 4+ years of Nazi occupation, and could think of no better way of doing so than by also *liberating* themselves from excessive fabric in their swimming costumes. My dad was delighted to capture them on film with his own, *liberated*, German camera. So, by August, 1945, if created shortly after VE-Day, the preceding May, the bikini was already three months old.

The actual invention of the bikini, therefore, predated the supposed July 5, 1946 "release" date (Figure 3, Left) by at least eleven, and most likely fourteen, months. All that was released in Paris in 1946 was advertising aimed at the U.S. Market. But bikinis were almost immediately banned from beaches around the world, and photos of girls wearing them were even censored from newspapers and magazines as "indecent." Not surprisingly, the swimwear was condemned by the Pope as sinful. In the late 1940's and early '50's girls wearing bikinis in American beauty pageants were told to "cover up:" the more modest "one-piece" swimsuit reigned supreme.

The big "bikini breakthrough" came eight years after my Dad snapped his shutter. Brigitte Bardot, at age 18, on the opposite, Mediterranean coast from Biarritz, was the most photographed person at the 1953 Cannes Film festival (Figure 3, Center). Overnight, Bardot became *the* "Bikini Girl," and simultaneously the most famous French Citizen in the world, even more so than her

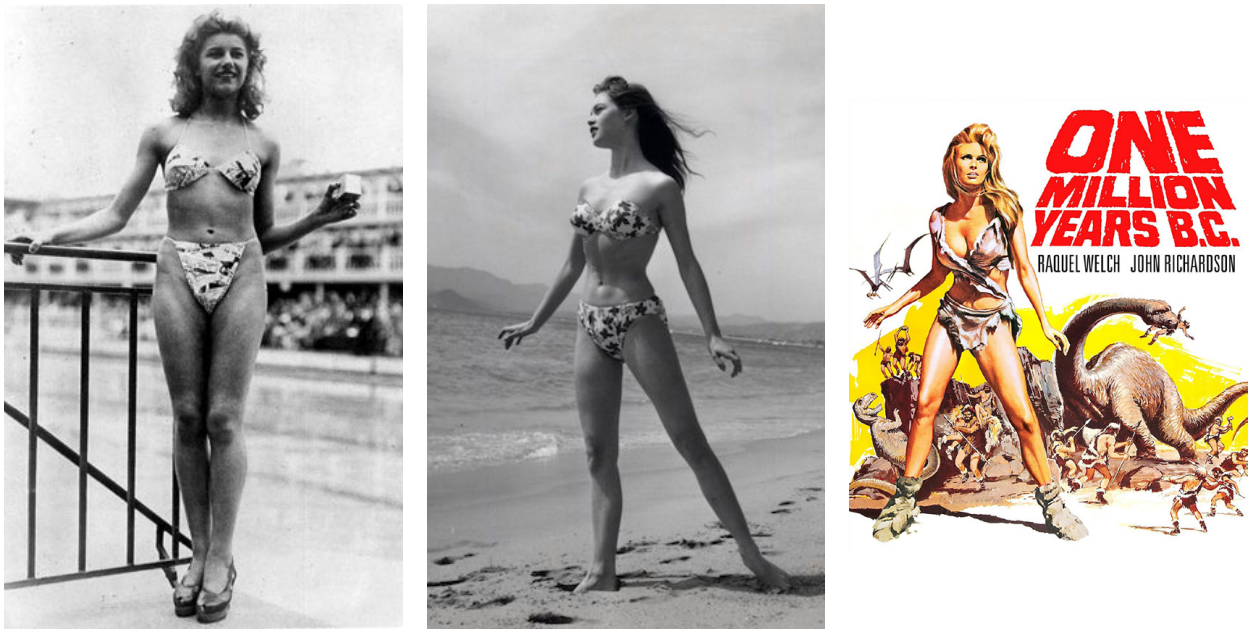


Figure 3: *Latecomers. Left: Micheline Bernardini, at a Paris swimming pool in July, 1946, where she is erroneously credited with displaying the very first bikini in public, 11 months after Dick Dillon photographed the Figure 1 Saint Jean de Luz bombshell. Center: Brigitte Bardot, France's most famous "bikini girl" on the beach at Cannes, in 1953 at age 18. Right: Hollywood strikes back, with Raquel Welch in her rabbit-skin bikini in 1967. Sorry, Dinosaurs not included. All three photos in the public domain, from the Internet.*

President, Charles ("Nose-full-of-Nickels") De Gaulle. Americans found Bardot in her bikini much easier to look at than De Gaulle's nose. Pundits claimed that Bardot's bikini was the most important French export, greater than all automakers (who could not *give* French cars away to Americans), and cheese and wine producers, combined.

By the late 1950's the bikini was firmly established in Southern California, and even more so in Hawaii, where the favored "upper element" like as not was a single coconut shell, split in half. By the early-to-mid 1960's, Hollywood had so completely embraced the bikini through an endless string of mindless beach films, (*Beach Party*, *Beach Blanket Bingo*, *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*, etc.), that it now seemed characteristic of Los Angeles. The bikini's *ne plus ultra* came in 1967, when Raquel Welch (Figure 3, Right) dodged dinosaurs in Hollywood's chronologically impossible confusion of archaeology with palaeontology. Plenty of bad things came out of World War II, but a few good things as well, and not just the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan: high on the list of WWII superlative spinoffs would be the bikini.

The conventional wisdom about the origins of the bikini, that remarkable swimming costume that generations of American males have thanked God for in their nightly prayers, must now be revised. Its putative 1946 birth in Paris was too far north, and a year too late. The G.I. shutterbug, Richard H. Dillon (1924-2016), who captured it on film at Saint Jean de Luz in August 1945 later became a world-famous historian, a member of the Los Angeles Corral of Westerners, then of the San Francisco Corral, and eventually honored as *Living Legend* No. 46. More than seventy years ago, my father was no less honored to be present at the true *Birth of the Bikini* a year earlier and 500 miles south of where less cautious historians subsequently located this critically important (at least for those of us with "y" chromosomes) cultural milestone. Shortly after Dick Dillon took his photos, he and all of his fellow-sufferers in olive drab at B.A.U. learned of VJ-Day. The war was now truly over, and none of them would be sent on to invade Japan. The swimsuit later called the *Bikini*, worn on that beach just a few miles from their all-G.I. campus, would soon become a symbol of just how different their postwar world had become.

Frontier Cats to the Rescue!

Monsignor Francis J. Weber

The delicate balance of nature was severely compromised with the introduction of European rats into California. Unknown before the arrival of European ships, those dangerous and destructive stowaways became a real problem for both natives and settlers.

The seriousness of this new challenge is confirmed by medical historians who estimate that more people have died from disease transmitted by rats than from all the wars in history!

The early missionaries, knowing the basic principles of ecology, sought to counteract this threat by importing felines to the area. Fray Pedro Font (1738-1781), the chaplain and diarist to the Anza Expedition of 1775-1776, noted that when they "were returning to Mexico City, they were asked by the resident priest at San Carlos to acquire cats, two for San Gabriel and two for San Diego at the request of the friars who urgently asked for them."

Reminders of their existence at the missions are found today in the cat-holes cut in some of the original doors at San Gabriel, San Fernando, San Juan Bautista and Santa Ines.

About the same time, another missionary, Father Thomas Eixarch, working among the Yuma Indians, living miserably in a brush hut overrun by rats, noted tersely in his diary for the benefit of his successors: "Bring cats."

John C. Luttig confirms the value of felines on the American frontier in his journal for 1812-1813:

> This morning we left old she cat in camp. At breakfast I missed her, and Mrs. Manuel sent a man for the cat. He returned in the evening with the cat, to our great satisfaction. This remark may seem ridiculous, but an animal of this kind is more valuable in this country than a fine horse. Mice are in great abundance and the company has lost for want of Cats several thousands of dollars in merchandise….There was not a night passed since I got the cat, that she has not caught from four to ten mice and brought them to her kittens.

Following the discovery of gold, the shortage of cats prompted numerous appeals. Thomas J. Tidwell wrote his brother January, 1851, "The mice here are actually worse than the rats ever were at Sacramento City! Nothing is safe from them—not even our noses at night. Let this touch your heart, my dear brother, and induce you to bring home one cat at least, pregnant if possible."

In his *Reminiscences of a Ranger*, Horace Bell described how entrepreneurs took advantage of the cat shortage:

> In 1849, San Francisco was over-supplied with rats, without a corresponding supply of cats. The supply of cats in Los Angeles was overabundant, while of late there were few. It was therefore left to the fertile brain of a distinguished Virginian to equalize this seeming inequality in the nature of things. Consequently he went to work and gathered up all the cats he could get, either by hook or crook, caged them up and shipped them to San Francisco….Pete was supreme dictator as to prices and sold his cats, several hundred in number, at prices ranging from $16 to $100 each.

Reginald Bretnor, writing in a recent issue of *The American West*, observed that "it is very difficult to assess the part cats played in helping settlers defeat the wilderness." While admitting that "without cats, the American West would have been settled," he admitted that "we owe those frontier cats a debt of gratitude."

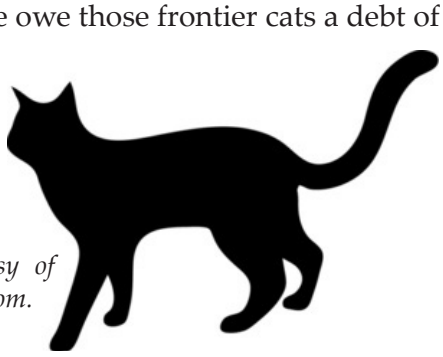


Image courtesy of clipartfest.com.

Monthly Roundup . . .

March 2017

Thomas Pinney

Before Los Angeles became known for its entertainment industry, it was famous as a center of citrus cultivation. The oranges on the city seal are testament to this heritage, but pride of place at the top of the emblem is granted not to the orange, but the grape. For the Westerners' March Roundup, guest speaker Thomas Pinney recounted Los Angeles' long-forgotten history as "The City of Vines," the real pioneer of wine cultivation in California and the nation.

The United States is home to several native grape species, but none were suitable for wine production until 1782, when the first Spanish "mission grapes" were cultivated at Mission San Juan Capistrano. This grape made a poor wine and was best fortified into brandy, but from these humble beginnings the greater Los Angeles area attracted more grape varieties and talent from far and wide. Frenchman Jean-Louis Vignes was the first to grow grapes in L.A. on a commercial scale in the 1830s, and by the Mexican War the Los Angeles wine industry had grown to a size sufficient to inebriate occupying U.S. troops *en masse*. In the decades following statehood, Irishman Matthew Keller introduced modern mechanization and pasteurization to Los Angeles winemaking, and Germans Charles Kohler and John Frohling partnered to bring SoCal wine to the East Coast. By the early 1880s, Anglo-American James DeBarth Shorb embarked on an ambitious expansion plan to sell to a global market and prove once and for all that Europe was not the only place that could grow good wine.

Unfortunately, the Los Angeles wine industry collapsed instead. Overproduction lowered prices, railroads accelerated urbanization, but the biggest blow was the vine blight, "Pierce's Disease." This blight, more than anything else, contributed to the cultivation of citrus as a substitute product in Los Angeles. Grapes in the city made a partial recovery by the turn of the century, but Prohibition from 1920 to 1933 closed most of Los Angeles' wineries. By this point, the center of gravity of U.S. winemaking had shifted from Los Angeles to the Napa Valley, which had adopted new varieties of grapes and had little conflicts with urban development.

Los Angeles wine is a distant memory today, but traces can still be found if one knows where to look. German grape growers originally founded the city of Anaheim, its name a compound of the Santa Ana River and *heim*, meaning "home." What was once the world's largest winery, built by DeBarth Shorb, is now the Huntington Library and Gardens. Therefore, the grapes atop the Los Angeles seal aren't so surprising after all. The Westerners thanks Thomas Pinney for sharing the accomplishments and legacies of Los Angeles' wine pioneering history. If you would like to know more about California viniculture, check out Pinney's *History of Wine in America*.

~ John Dillon

April 2017

Gary Keyes and Mike Lawler

Throughout the 20th century, the City of Angels hosted a series of less-than angelic organizations that differed in ideology, but all spoke the common language of intolerance. Amidst a disturbing rise in anti-Semitic vandalism and other hate crimes in the last year, guest speaker Gary Keyes and his assistant Mike Lawler invited the Westerners at April's Roundup to reflect on how Los Angeles tackled hate groups in the past and where we stand on such issues today.

The first major racist movement in Los Angeles was the Ku Klux Klan from 1915 through the twenties. This "second" Klan differed markedly from the original of the Reconstruction era, which disbanded in the 1880s after accomplishing its mission to curb recently emancipated Blacks' rights. The second generation K.K.K. added anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism to its white supremacy, which earned it more followers across the nation than in the Deep South. Furthermore, the Ku Klux Klan of the early 20th century was not clandestine but acted in the open as an accepted community organization – 3,000 Klansmen and 15,000 spectators attended the largest Klan rally in Los Angeles at the height of their popularity in 1924.

By the 1930s, nativists found common cause with newly in-vogue fascists, who differed in role models and methods but held the same peoples in contempt. Gerald L.K. Smith, an ally of Huey Long and ideological founder of contemporary American white nationalism, moved the headquarters of his Christian Nationalist Crusade to Glendale. The most famous American fascist group in Los Angeles, however, was the German-American Bund. This organization of mostly first-generation German-Americans imitated the Nazis down to its boots and *ersatz* Hitler Youth clubs, yet also performed ideological gymnastics to revere both Adolf Hitler and George Washington together. The Bund appropriated Hindenburg Park for its rallies, the largest of which hosted 2,000 members in 1939. Ultimately, the German-American Bund collapsed due to the onset of World War Two and the arrest of its American *Führer* Fritz Kühn on embezzlement charges.

Smaller hate groups persisted in L.A. after the prewar Klan and Bund high tide. George Lincoln Rockwell headquartered the American Nazi Party in Glendale in the 1960s, and received national attention in an interview for *Playboy* magazine. He was jailed for housing code violations and was ultimately assassinated by a disgruntled member—the American Nazis would linger in Glendale into the 1980s. By then, Los Angeles' most prominent racists had returned to a nativist and less explicitly fascist model. Glendale yet again hosted another major white supremacist, lawyer William Daniel Johnson, who gained notoriety (and sparked a small riot in 1987) for his proposed "Pace Amendment" to the U.S. Constitution, which called for a racial definition of citizenship and the deportation of all non-whites. Johnson later founded the American Freedom Party in 2010 and briefly served as an aide for the Trump presidential campaign until his past was uncovered and he was wisely fired.

Many hate groups have come and gone in Los Angeles, but Keyes and Lawler noted that the latest examples will by no means be the last to test our society's values and the limits to our freedoms of speech and assembly. The Westerners offers their thanks to Keyes and Lawler for presenting this insightful if sobering look into Los Angeles' less appealing history.

~ John Dillon

May 2017

Alan Pollack and Dianne Erskine-Hellrigel

The St. Francis Dam failure and flood of 1928 was the greatest American civil engineering disaster of the 20th century, and California's second deadliest human tragedy after the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. San Francisco's city flag evokes the latter catastrophe with a phoenix rising from the flames, but Los Angeles' experience with the dam break is today largely forgotten. Alan Pollack and Dianne Erskine-Hellrigel are spearheads behind a new effort to recognize the St. Francis dam as a national monument; as the guest speakers to the Westerners' May Roundup, they delivered a thoroughly illustrated and deeply personal history of the dam's failure and its human toll.

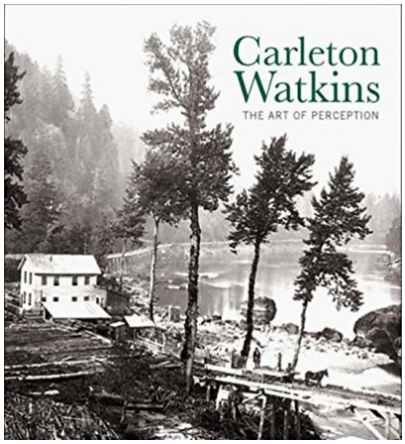
As recounted by Pollack, the history of the St. Francis Dam is a story of the brilliance and hubris of William Mulholland, the founding father of Los Angeles' modern water supply. By the 1920s, the growing city of L.A. already needed more water than his famous 1913 aqueduct could provide. Yet Mulholland doomed his attempt to increase the water supply from the start with a deeply flawed dam in San Francisquito Canyon. The site's geology was porous, the dam was heightened without increasing the size of its foundation, and each layer of concrete was not properly washed after setting. Leaks appeared only five days after the dam was filled, and Mulholland blithely declared that they weren't serious. Physics proved otherwise, and the St. Francis Dam burst close to midnight at 11:57 pm, March 12, 1928. The ensuing flood swept through the towns of the Santa Clara river valley and caused 431 confirmed deaths by the time it reached the Pacific Ocean five hours later. An investigation found Mulholland guilty of negligently choosing an inappropriate site, and eight years later he died a broken man.

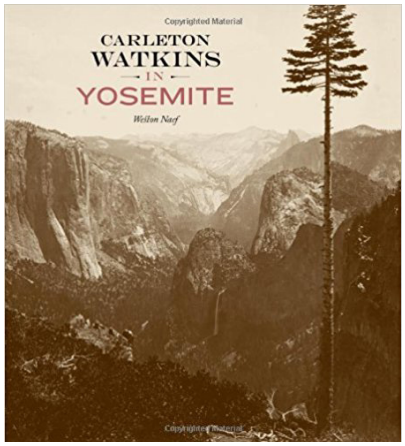
Many histories of the St. Francis Dam disaster would be content with the technical details and the biography of essential figures like Mulholland, but Erskine-Hellrigel, armed with an astounding array of photographs and interviews, gave faces and voices to the flood's victims and survivors in the second half of the presentation. Dam keeper Tony Harnischfeger, his girlfriend Leona Johnson, and their son Coder were the first to die, but local legend insists that Tony survived, as his body was never found. All members of the Rising family at Powerhouse 2 perished, save for the father Ray, who swam to safety. Strangers arranged and paid for a funeral for the unclaimed body of a three-year-old boy, later identified as Johnny Traxler. Eighty-four Edison workers died at Kemp Camp, and the death toll would have surely been higher had night watchman Ed Locke not roused his companions from their tents—Locke himself, however, did not survive. These stories and many more served as a sobering reminder that the disaster affected real, ordinary people of all ages and stripes, who were not just faceless statistics.

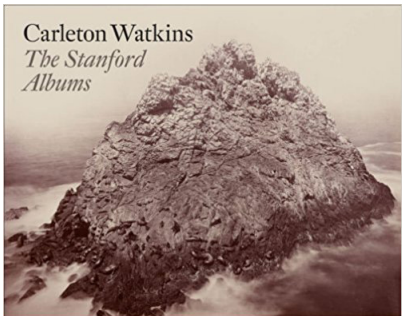
Pollack and Erskine-Hellrigel delivered a compelling case for why the St. Francis Dam disaster mattered and should be remembered not just by Angelenos, but nationally. The L.A. Westerners thanks them for the engaging presentation and offers *The Saint Francis Dam Disaster National Memorial Act* good luck in Congress.

~ John Dillon

Down the Western Book Trail . . .







Images courtesy of amazon.com.

CARLTON WATKINS: The Art of Perception. Text by Douglas R. Nickel, Peter E. Palmquist, David A. Ross, and Maria Morris Hambourg. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1999. 228 pages, Illustrations, Foreword, Introduction, Notes, References, Catalogue. Hard Cover, 12 x 11 inch oversize edition, out of print, $28.00-$65.00. Paperback edition $9.00-$35.00.

CARLTON WATKINS IN YOSEMITE, by Weston Naef, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA, 2008. Hard cover, 9 x 10 inches, with 49 plates, plus other illustrations, explanatory text, and commentary. $29.95.

CARLTON WATKINS: The Stanford Albums. Photographs of the Pacific Coast (1862-76), the Yosemite Valley (1861 and 1865-66), and the Columbia River and Oregon (1867-and 1870). Text by John L. Hennessy, Connie Wolf, Elizabeth Kathleen Mitchell, George Philip LeBourdais, John E. Mustain, Jason D. Weems, Gavin Jones, Judith Richardson, Elizabeth Hutchinson, Robert H. Dawson, Corey Keller, Stephen Palumbi, James Clifford, Barton H. Thompson Jr., David M. Kennedy, Alexander Nemerov, Erik Steiner and Richard White. Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University Press, 2014. 280 pages, Illustrations, Foreword, Introduction, Notes, Essays on historical subject matter, natural history, and photography. Hard Cover, 11.25 x 14.25 inch oversize edition, $40.00.

Reviewed by Brian D. Dillon

No other early photographer caught the flavor and the uniqueness of California and the Far West as completely as did Carleton Watkins. And sadly, no struggling artist experimenting with a new medium way out west led a more tragic life. Three outstanding collections of Carleton Watkins' photographic work, published over a fifteen year span, do justice to his genius and should form the nucleus of any serious California historian's photographic library.

The first, 1999, volume accompanied an exhibition of Watkins' photographs displayed first at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, then at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The show terminated in early 2000. Sponsors of this traveling exhibit were the Huntington Library, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The second, 2008 book, features 49 of Watkin's stunning images of Yosemite, taken between 1861 and 1881, all from the Getty Museum's own collection. The third and final volume commemorates an exhibition of Watkins' photographic work held at the Cantor Arts Center of Stanford University in 2014, coinciding with the 150th anniversary of the Yosemite Grant.

Above: *The wreck of the British ship* Viscata*, off the Golden Gate in March, 1868. Photograph courtesy of the Bancroft Library.*

As valuable as the magnificent photographs in all three volumes are the biographical details about the photographer himself, his interests, and accomplishments. Besides the spectacular large-format photographs reproduced in the 1999, 2008, and 2014 volumes, Watkins also produced many thousands of smaller postcards, commercial prints, and, especially, stereo views, over his long professional career. Historically significant Watkins exposures range in rarity from sole examples locked away in high-security archives, to hundreds of dog-eared, duplicate copies still lurking in shoe boxes in junk stores and used book shops.

Carleton Eugene Watkins (1829-1916) came to California from upstate New York. Bypassing the gold fields, he went to work for his childhood friend, Collis P. Huntington, in Sacramento. A year later he moved to San Francisco, where by 1854 he was a daguerrotypist's assistant. Teaching himself the rudiments of photography, by 1857 Watkins was working as an independent photographer, what we would today call a "free lancer," specializing in field assignments. As early as 1859 increasing numbers of important commissions were coming his way. Wealthy industrialists, politicians, and landowners began to realize that photographic documentation was of great value in attracting potential investors, or supporting insurance claims, and as evidence in court cases. Thus did Watkins pioneer new commercial uses of photography while many contemporaries limited themselves to indoor portraiture. He experimented with new negative, printing, and chemical development processes as early as 1857, and by 1861 designed and built his "mammoth" camera, to hold 18 x 22-inch glass plate negatives. With this camera, Watkins made

his first photographic recording trip to the Yosemite Valley, cementing his position as the foremost American nature photographer.

Watkins made photographic history, over and over again. Examples of this work, unsurpassed by later photographers, are showcased in all three volumes. Watkins pioneered photography as a means of influencing the government to preserve America's unique natural treasures. As committed a conservationist as John Muir, he was twice as effective. As early as 1862, the *New York Times* was raving about his Yosemite photographs: these images persuaded Abraham Lincoln to sign legislation protecting the Yosemite Valley in 1864. Watkins' Yosemite exposures are still heart-stopping today in their beauty, clarity, and technical brilliance, even to those of us who have made many trips to the Yosemite Valley over a great many years. Their impact a century and a half ago on Eastern politicians and decision-makers who had never ventured west of the Mississippi can only be imagined.

In 1865, Watkins was named the official photographer for the California Geological Survey, the foremost state agency of its kind, which those of most other states and, eventually, the Federal Government, were modeled after. Josiah Whitney immodestly named the highest peak in California after himself, but was gracious enough, in 1865, to name a peak after his hard-working photographer. Mt. Watkins, appropriately, overlooks the Yosemite Valley. Carleton Watkins opened his celebrated photographic gallery in San Francisco, and eventually named it the *Yosemite Art Gallery*. Held in the highest esteem in Europe, Watkins won medals for his photography in Paris (1868) and Vienna (1873). Always a technical, as well as an artistic, innovator, he created a fully-enclosed, field photography wagon, pulled by a two-horse team. "Hit and run" field photography was now a thing of the past, for Watkins' photo wagon could safely transport hundreds of his oversized glass plate negatives, allowing for greatly increased photographic coverage far from cities and towns.

A committed and brilliant artist who, unfortunately, ignored business concerns, Watkins was devastated by the Depression of 1874. He went bankrupt, and lost his beloved Yosemite Gallery. His priceless negatives become the property of others, including one of his principal competitors, Isaiah West Tabor (1830-1912), who now put his own name on Watkins' work. Despite such setbacks, Watkins was invited to present his work at the 1876 American Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. And, after years of struggle, Watkins opened a new San Francisco studio. On his 50th birthday, he married his 22-year old photographic assistant. Throughout the 1880's his commissions became increasingly agricultural, in Northern California arboriculture and with the Southern California citrus boom.

But as his life took on a new tack with a growing family, Watkins' eyesight began to fail, the worst of all possible maladies for any photographer. His final successful field commission, recording the swan-song of California placer mining on the Feather River, was in 1891. Later, a year-long commission for Phoebe Apperson Hearst went uncompleted owing to advancing blindness. Watkins' nadir came in 1895 when, destitute, he lived in an abandoned Oakland rail car with his wife and children. His old friend, millionaire Collis Huntington, took pity on him, and helped the family get back on their feet financially. But by 1897 Carleton Watkins was too blind to continue photography, and could only sell new prints made from his old negatives. His most crushing blow came in 1906, when the San Francisco Earthquake and Fires destroyed his final photographic gallery, most of his "new series" (post-1874) negatives, and the balance of his mind. Bankrupt again for the third time, blind, and declared mentally incompetent, in 1910 Carleton Watkins was remanded to the California State Insane Asylum.

Watkin's life and work invites comparison with his contemporary, multi-talented Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904). Despite the "insanity" classification they both shared, late-bloomer Muybridge was a crass commercialist rather than an artistic purist,

who falsified photographs for filthy lucre, and even got away with murder, thanks to an insanity defense paid for by Leland Stanford. Watkins, for his part, instead just went quietly blind, and then insane, without any homicide or fraud.

Many different institutions preserve original prints by Carleton Watkins. The Bancroft Library, the Huntington Library, and the J. Paul Getty Museum are only three amongst the most prominent in California. For a century and a half Carleton Watkins has been called "America's Greatest Landscape Photographer," yet he was so much more. His photographs of the Yosemite Valley show a pristine place, without litter, bearded back-packers in Birkenstocks, or the roads and traffic jams that so characterize the place now. Those of mining, farming, ranching, lumbering, and railroading in California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada and Utah are as valuable for historical reconstruction as his crystal-clear photographs of long-vanished 1860's San Francisco. And Watkins' photographs of Indian camps at different locations in Northern California, and those of Chinese, the "invisible men" of Western American history, at work in placer mining more than forty years after the initial Gold Rush, are priceless ethnohistorical moments, frozen in time.

Our most brilliant and talented photographer died in 1916, and was buried in an unmarked grave on the California State Mental Hospital grounds. Fortunately, we can transcend his tragic life and even more tragic death with the aid of the 1999, 2008, and 2014 volumes. Watkins lives on through his amazing photographs. His talent and his unique contribution now belong to all Californians. No other early photographer left us as enduring a legacy as Carleton Watkins, one so artistically impressive, nor one as valuable or varied for historical research. We shall return to these three splendid books time and again.

FROM OUR FILES

50 Years Ago
#83 – June 1967

Philip J. Rasch provided the '67 Spring issue's lead article on the murders of the Casner brothers in Texas, 1877. These California prospectors amassed a $20k fortune in gold, a flock of sheep, and a bumper crop of thieves who desired both. A triple murder-robbery prompted revenge killings from the surviving Casners, which sparked a convoluted series of reprisals and counter-reprisals that left upwards of twenty men dead.

An obituary honored the eventful life of the gregarious book-collector, wine-taster, and founding member of the Los Angeles Westerners, Robert James Woods (1892-1967). "Everybody loved him," wrote the author W.W. Robinson.

This issue also announced the establishment earlier that January of the Dallas-based Society for Historical Archaeology, devoted to the era of European exploration of the Western Hemisphere. To assist publication of their annual journal, *Historical Archaeology*, the society offered "institutional" membership at $15 per year, and "individual" memberships at $7.50.