



Dewey Chambers

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Helen Flynn

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UOP Students' Book Tells Ten Authentic Tales Of Early Days In Mother Lode

By Michael Dunne
Bee Correspondent

The time was 1849 and the place was a thin sliver of the western Sierra foothills, to become popularly known as the Veta Madre, the Mother Lode.

Gold was being unearthed in the region, attracting farmers from the Ohio Valley, attorneys from sophisticated Boston law firms, doctors from the Great Plains, the adventuresome from anywhere and everywhere.

Much has been recalled and romanticized about their frequent struggles with unaccustomed hardships, the primitive lifestyle, the slow search for the magic yellow glitter in icy streams, the fires which often rampaged through their hastily constructed communities, the violence born of greed.

Less has been said about mining camp humor, the pastimes, which the argonauts pursued away from their picks and pans, the lives of the women and children at home in the mining communities, the pursuit of the newly found gold by the men who tended the taverns, hotels and shops, and

holiday customs in the Mother Lode.

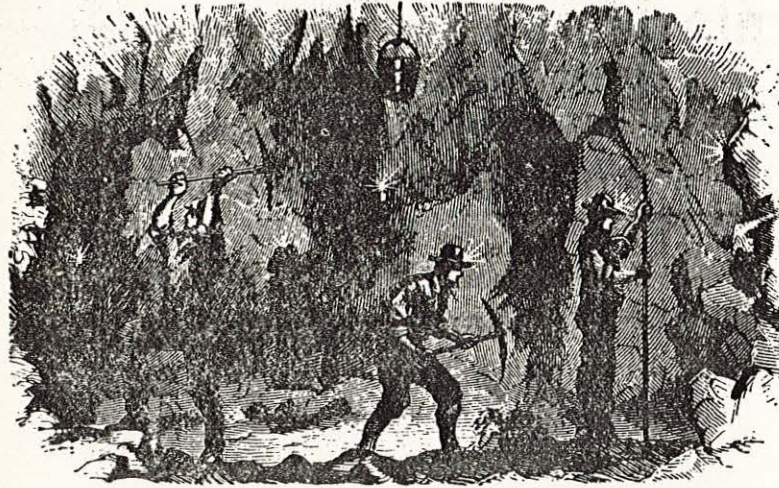
Earlier this year, however, 14 students from the University of Pacific in Stockton ventured into the Mother Lode with tape recorder and pen to compile gold-era recollections by talking with numerous old-timers.

The results of their project have now been published by the university in a 53-page paperback book called "Folk and Other Tales from the Mother Lode."

Ten short stories appear in the book, each rewritten for youngsters in the third through fifth grades.

Although the tales are given to romantic liberties, they accurately reflect daily life in the Mother Lode from 1849 until a decade after the turn of the century, believes Dr. Dewey Chambers, a UOP education professor and recognized authority in children's literature who oversaw the project.

"In terms of authenticity and correct detail, I think they're immaculate," remarked Dr. Chambers. Although there is some fiction in all the stories, each is based on fact, he added.



"Some have been changed slightly to make them suitable for children, some tales have been combined into one story, some have been written down as told. Each has a foundation in fact. Each has elements of fiction. Each has tried to capture the spirit and the essence of the Mother Lode," notes Dr. Chambers in an introduction to the collection.

In the stories, the region's spirit and essence is most often reflected in a rugged independence,

corny humor and loneliness.

There is little violence in the book, although the legendary bandit Joaquin Murrieta appears in two stories. In one he is cast as a fun-loving Halloween goblin in Murphys, Calaveras County, and in the other he appears "with the speed of lightning" and "a flash of scarlet" to rescue a youngster faced with drowning in a collapsing tunnel in Sonora, Tuolumne County.

Glimpses of mining camp pastimes are offered in

"Lucky Ping," in which a tethered bear and two bulls do battle, in "a makeshift arena of boxes, barrels and brush," and in "The Goddess of Liberty," in which a "plain mountain girl" who thinks herself no more attractive than "a mountain goat" is chosen queen of Murphys' annual Fourth of July celebration.

Slices of life from the gold fields are captured in "A Star Above Baldwin Mountain," in which a boy and his father deliver cans of fresh milk in Sonora twice daily; "A Day of Celebration," in which a 10-year-old boy stumbles across the gruesome hanging of a cattle rustler; and "A Turtle for Ah Chee," the story of a small boy's reaction to the death and funeral of a Chinese cook for whom he had gathered turtles to make soup.

Humor comes through in "The Halloween Bandit" and "The Twenty-Dollar Nightgown," in which practical joker Ward Pike wins a \$20 gold piece from a bartender who bet him that he could not steal the nightgown off the bartender's wife without her knowing who did it.

Mining camp racism also

is evident in several of the stories with frequent reference to Chinese argonauts who were restricted to used claims and the segregation of neighborhoods ("The boys couldn't find Juan at his place in town, and Johnny's mother would blister him if they went into the Mexican section too far.").

Even male chauvinism flashes its limited consciousness. ("Don't go near the mine, little girl! You know girls are bad luck near mines.").

Dr. Chambers is uncertain what will become of the book. The initial printing consisted of only about 200 copies, many of which already have been distributed. The reaction from persons who have read the book has been "fantastic" and "very, very positive," said Dr. Chambers.

Whether more books will be printed and put on sale is a decision that is up to the university administration, he noted, adding that such a decision probably will depend largely on public demand.

In the meantime, Dr. Chambers is thinking of undertaking his next such project either in the Delta or the Salinas Valley.