
JOAQUIN MILLER

NEWSLETTER

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Note: For those who didn't catch it last time MGK's new address is 8242 Salish Lane, Blaine, WA 98230-9545, her phone is (360) 371 2474 and the e-mail is joaquinmiller@comcast.net and no other.

MGK's Reflections

If JM could see California now! He dreamed of growth but could not in his wildest dreams have realized how prophetic would be his words. Take for example his last lines in his *The Future of California* as presented in 1875 in Benj. J. Martin's *Choice Specimens of American Literature, and a Literary Reader, being selections from the chief American writers.*

The Future of California.

Dared I but say a prophecy,
As sang the holy men of old,
Of rock built cities, yet to be
Along these shining shores of gold,
Crowding athirst into the sea,
What wondrous marvels might be told!
Enough to know that empire here
Shall burn her brightest, loftiest star;
Here art and eloquence shall reign,
As o'er the wolf-reared realm of old;
Here learned and famous from afar,
To pay their noble court, shall come,
And shall not seek or see in vain,
But look on all, with wonder dumb,

Afar the bright Sierras lie,
A swaying line of snowy white,
A fringe of heaven hung in sight
Against the blue base of the sky.

I look along each gaping gorge,
I hear a thousand sounding strokes,
Like giants rending giant oaks,

Of brawny Vulcan at his forge;
I see pick-axes flash and shine,
And great wheels whirling in a mine.
Here winds a thick and yellow thread,
A moss'd and silver stream instead:
And trout that leap'd its rippled tide
Have turn'd upon their sides and died.

He had seen it all since the first gold seekers in the streams in 1854 through the first quartz and later copper mines so recently well described in Jane B. Schuldberg's *Kennett: The Short, Colorful Life of a California Copper Town and Its Founding Family*. Chico, CA: Stansbury Publishing, 2005. MGK's uncles worked in those mines the summer of 1914 and from there they saw Mt. Lassen erupt the year after JM's death.

Happenings

Just as JM resurfaced in Ashland, Oregon in October 2004 it is now firm that he will again reappear at Shasta College in Redding, and Old Shasta, California at some of his old haunts October 14, and 15, 2005. Our old 2004 conference web site will soon be updated. There will be more particulars in the July newsletter.

We all know that JM was forever passing through Redding on the stage and later by rail from the Bay Area back and forth to his parents' home in Eugene, Oregon. And we have a few records of some of these earlier October visits.

First, fresh from his acceptance in London as a poet with the publication of his *Pacific Poems*, and his *Songs of the Sierras* in 1871, JM evidently wrote the following piece as a correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune* from which it was picked up by local papers such as the *Daily Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City, Nevada by his old friend Archibald Skillman who had first printed JM's fledgling pseudonymous

Letters to the Editor and poems in the *Shasta Courier* back in 1859 before, during, and long after JM's alleged horse stealing incident for which he became locally more famous than for his literary accomplishments, even his groundbreaking 1873 *Life Among the Modocs* which was really about the Wintu Indians with whom he had lived on the McCloud River on and off from 1854-1859. In the following article he referred to the Indians as Shastas as did the miners of his day when talking of any Indians living at the base of Mt. Shasta be they Shasta, Modoc, or Wintu.

1872 *Daily Territorial Enterprise*, Virginia [City], Nevada. Oct. 25, 1872; 1:2-3

**Joaquin Miller; Reminiscences of the
Poet of the Sierras.**

[Correspondence of the *Chicago Tribune*]

Mount Shasta, Cal., October 10—

In this, the most northern county of California, I have met many of the friends and former comrades of Joaquin Miller. For several years he lived a wild and romantic life among the Shasta Mountains. And he is well remembered by the early settlers. An English critic in reviewing the Poems of Joaquin Miller expressed his wonder that any one could write such descriptions without having breathed the air of Switzerland. Should he ever be fortunate enough to visit Siskiyou County, Cal., the mystery will be explained. In this lofty region, where the Klamath, Shasta, and Sacramento Rivers spring from the eternal glaz[c]iers, of Mount Shasta, and the summit of the "Red McCloud" is leveled off into a bare and treeless plain, and splintered mountain peaks are stationed about like sentinels uplifting their crimson lances to the sky, he passed several years of his early youth, in daily and nightly communion with the Genesis of the Mountains. In fact, his *Songs of the Sierras* are a guidebook to all the grand features of the country, and it is difficult to keep from quoting from them, so complete and perfect are his descriptions. His mind and this whole mountain region seem to be a reflex of each other. It is fit that he should sing its praises to the world, for he is its legitimate offspring, and it may claim him as

a parent claims its child. It is his right to say:

Have I not sung thy scenes, surpassing skies,
'Till Europe lifted up her face,
And marveled at thy matchless grace,
With eager and inquiring eyes?

When Joaquin Miller lived here he was less than 20 years of age, but even then he was looked upon as a character with whom

It Was Dangerous To Interfere.

The rich gold diggings in the valleys had not yet been worked out, and the entire populations were rough, long-bearded miners, many of whom were desperadoes, representing the scum of the cities of the world. These men were always armed and bloody hand-to-hand encounters were common. Joaquin Miller, who was much of a recluse and very eccentric, was for a while a butt for the ridicule for these men. Although usually dressed in rough buckskin he took especial care of his long flowing locks, which reached almost to his shoulders, and he invariably wore gloves. On one occasion he was insulted and attacked by several of these fellows in a bar room; pistols were drawn, and a regular conflict ensued, in which he came off victorious, after having disabled two of his antagonists. After this, his reputation for courage was established, and he was not molested. I am informed by a printer in the office of a newspaper in Yreka that Joaquin Miller several times sent in verses for publications which were invariably thrown into the waste-basket by the editor, with the observation, "There is more trash from that absurd lunatic."

It is evident that the occasion of this betaking himself to the fastnesses of the mountains and living among the Indians became the foundation of his poem, "Californian." He was in the employ of a farmer in Shasta Valley, and for some cause or other the man flatly refused to pay him his wages. He at once saddled one of his employer's best horses, and

Proceeded To Ride Off.

He was followed on horseback by the owner, the Sheriff of the county, and two other men, and was overtaken on the brow of a hill. Refusing to surrender, a desperate conflict ensued, in which the Sheriff was badly wounded, and Joaquin Miller dashed down the hill with his clothes full of bullet

holes, and escaped into the lofty mountains beyond the McCloud River, where he remained hidden among the wild Indians for more than a year, although the Sheriff subsequently recovered, and Miller's conduct was sustained by the community at large, who knew the circumstances.

The Shasta Indians like all other American Indians, are simply savages; but if they have any distinctive feature, it is in

The Beauty Of The Women.

Instead of the low, squat figure and beastly countenances of the squaws upon the plains, or in the valleys of California, you see tall, lithe forms, and expressive features, and delicate hands and feet. I saw one young girl at the base of Mount Shasta, who would be considered beautiful anywhere. She was extremely tall and very slender; her black hair was in two broad plaits, and hung two-thirds of the way to the ground; she wore bracelets and anklets upon her limbs, and barbaric ornaments in her ears; and the flashing eyes and the purple flush upon her cheeks bespoke all the passion and fiery glow of the Orient. As she and her mate stood by the bank of the bright McCloud beneath the shadow of the stately pine, in the setting sun, I wondered if Joaquin Miller did not have in his mind some other such being when he wrote:

Let red lips lift, proud curled, to kiss,
And round limbs lean, and raise and reach,
In love too passionate for speech,
Too full of blessedness and bliss
For anything but this and this.

At any rate, in a skirmish that took place between the Shasta Indians and the whites, some months after, he was found among the Indians with whom he sided for some romantic reason, and was captured and imprisoned in the town of Shasta; and the adventure, no doubt, furnished the material from which he wove the magnificent "Tale of the Tall Alcalde."

Back in the mountains, among the pine forests, the settlers belong to the class of

Frontiersman

Rather than the miners — the same class of pioneers found in all new countries — men who want plenty of elbow room, dislike too many neighbors,

and spend most of their time hunting and fishing. I passed the night in the home of one of these old hunters, who in his youth had been a Rocky mountain scout, and in company with Kit Carson had piloted Frémont over the Sierra Nevadas. He was a rough, uncouth old fellow, but honest and sincere to the last degree; and I was amused at his description of Joaquin Miller whom he seemed to know well and admire. He said he "had never heard of any of the books that Miller had writ, but he had been with him often in the mountains," and then related a

Number Of Their Adventures

Together, among which was a long story about Miller crawling into a thicket and killing a wounded grizzly bear, where everybody else was afraid to venture; and he closed by saying he had seen Miller tried more than once, and that he was "clear grit," had "sand in his craw," and "never did take water" — whatever those expressions mean.

I am glad I stumbled on this region of country. Having no acquaintance with Joaquin Miller, except through his published writings, I believe him thoroughly. His poems are the free outbreathings of a nature trained amid the grandeur and solitude of these majestic mountains, and are entirely destitute of the mawkish sentiment of schools. His description of Castle lake in "Ina," is one of the most complete and perfect descriptions ever written, and it is exactly correct in all its details. He left here about ten or twelve years ago, and never returned until he made his appearance in a rough costume, slept a night at the base of Mt. Shasta, talked in their own jargon to the astonished Indians, who at first did not recognize him, renewed his acquaintance with his old friends, and then left as suddenly as he came.

As a more mature writer after yet another trip back through Redding, JM published "Little Gold Miners of the Sierras" in the children's magazine *Wide Awake* in October of 1883. In this children's story warning of the dangers of using tobacco, JM kaleidoscoped together the experience of crossing the plains and losing one's parents, all together with people he had known in Old Shasta such as Jim Keene who became a millionaire in stock market trading and even coined a name - "Stumps" - from the Wintu language where children without parents

were known as “stump babies.”

Lastly in October 1898 upon returning from the Klondike JM was evidently joined by his editor and publisher Harr Wagner and they took a trip by horse and buggy along the Pit River. Later in his biography *Joaquin Miller and His Other Self*. Harr Wagner wrote that JM agreed with the writer of a then current newspaper article that the name of the river was “Pit” not “Pitt” because it had been named after the Indian’s practice of digging pits along its course (Wagner 1929:33) and that soon after the “Pit River massacre,” Joaquin had escaped from California and returned to his parents in Oregon (Wagner 1929:36). Wagner also wrote that “He never talked much about the things that were nearest to his heart,” (Wagner 1929: 86). Yet Wagner recounts JM’s facetious account of JM’s first sexual encounter and while recounting a luncheon they enjoyed at the Mountain House en route from Sisson [now Mount Shasta] to Alturas Wagner wrote that ... “the woman who conducted the hotel, or way station, whispered something to Joaquin. He seemed greatly interested. I asked him about it, and he said: ‘Mrs. Brock, the mother of Cali-Shasta [generally believed to be JM’s daughter], lives in a canyon near here, and I sent word to her that I was coming back to enjoy my old age with her, as I had my youth around Shasta ‘(Wagner 1929: 237-238).”

Research

While finalizing our bibliography MGK chanced across the following online story about which MGK had never heard anything before this telling. Have you?

The Carters Settle in Lane County

In 1852, at the age of six, Frank Carter arrived with his parents and siblings in Lane County. Due to his frontier background, he gained experiences that were invaluable to him in his future contact with the world. At school he was a classmate with Joaquin Miller (1837-1913), the “Poet of the Sierras.” They often hunted in the forests and along the streams of Oregon over a period of ten years.

One day, Carter and Miller were alerted by the cries of someone in distress. They ran to the spot and found an Indian, who had been attacked by a huge cinnamon bear, near death. The young hunters killed the beast, but were unable to save the man’s life.

The Great Rattlesnake Hunt

Carter recalled the great rattlesnake hunts which took place at Diamond Butte in Lane County, which was located between the Carter and Miller homes. The butte was 15 feet high, and was covered with rocks full of crevices and caves which gave welcome refuge to rattlers from all the surrounding country.

At one snake hunt, the men in the area met for one day and killed 1,500 rattlers. It is possible that was the greatest snake hunt and killing ever known in the Pacific Northwest. Diamond Butte was long regarded by Indians as sacred. They went there each year to get medicine from the Great Spirit. In the early days, the country, abounding in every variety of large and small game, was a hunter’s paradise. Carter was one of the expert hunters of the region. (Chap. 58 in *Sovereigns Of Themselves: A Liberating History of Oregon and Its Coast*. Volume IX. Abridged Online Edition. Compiled By M. Constance Guardino III With Rev. Marilyn A. Riedel. June 2002 Maracon Productions Chap. 58 <http://users.wi.net/~census/lesson42.html>) Oregon History Online 9.

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