

Slipper's Soliloquies

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By Fred Slipper

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As I have often done in the past, I have used information from old friends in my column. Sometimes they remind me of an episode that happened in my younger days, and now and then I have used their material verbatim. I am going to do this again — the following article on Mortimer Cook was sent to P. A. Stendal by Walker A. Tompkins of Santa Barbara, California. I wrote to Mr. Tompkins and have his permission to use it. Mr. Tompkins is writing a book on "100 Santa Barbara History Makers", and one chapter is the following on our own Mortimer Cook:

The Town's First Banker

During the first twenty-one years of its American status, Santa Barbara had no bank, no town clock, no street lights except for lanterns hung over doorways along State Street. Gold was more common than silver or currency, and was usually kept under the mattress or buried in the back yard for safekeeping. Then a Mexican War veteran arrived to found a bank and erect four town clocks

No character out of Santa Barbara history had a more colorful life than Mortimer Cook, the town's first banker.

He was born in Mansfield, Ohio in 1826, and while still in his teens enlisted in the U.S. Army to fight in the Mexican War. After five years in Mexico, he rode

horseback to Vera Cruz where he boarded ship for San Francisco to join the Gold Rush.

The ship paid a brief call at Santa Barbara, at which time Mortimer Cook vowed to some day return to live. Unlike most of his fellow Argonauts, Cook struck it rich in the Sierra Nevada diggings. He returned home to marry the girl next door, Nan Pollock, and after a New York honeymoon they took ship for Panama and eventually wound up in British Columbia where they operated a Frazer River toll bridge for a year.

Always restless, Cook returned to Ohio where he raised sheep until, as he told Nan, he got tired of toting lambs around. So they moved again, this time to Kansas where Cook built and operated a toll bridge across the Kaw River.

Mrs. Cook bore five daughters in their home near Topeka. One day while the Cooks were attending a wedding nearby, their house caught fire. Cook rushed back in time to save one of the girls, but the other children perished in the fire. Nearly driven insane by this tragedy, Cook kept thinking about far-off Santa Barbara, so in 1871 they moved there, being rowed ashore in a small boat since Stearns Wharf had not yet been built.

(Continued next week)