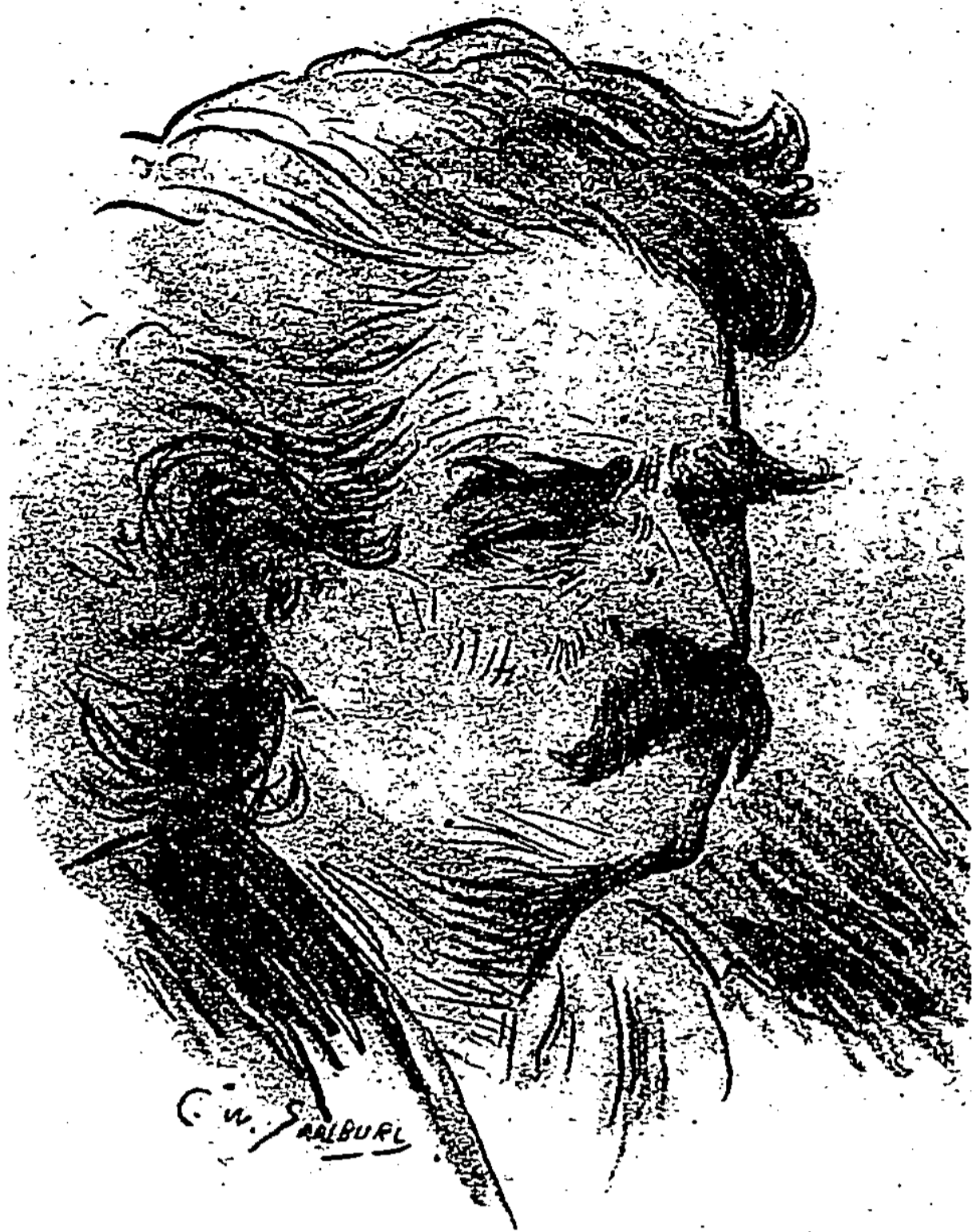


# SAN FRANCISCO OF THE '80S ABOUNDED IN NOTABLES

## C. W. Saalburg Has Memories of Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, Bernhardt, Davenport and Warfield



Mark Twain, From a Sketch Made in San Francisco.

By CHARLES W. SAALBURG

IN point of romance and adventure, it has long been said, there are only three cities in America—New York, New Orleans and San Francisco. They have had their strange, odd characters in profusion, their celebrities, their quaint nooks and crannies where men whose names were to ring around the world foregathered in their struggling days. The San Francisco of the '80s and '90s was such a city of glamour and atmosphere. I can vouch for that because I was there in the days when through the streets walked such people of destiny as Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Homer Davenport, Joaquin Miller, Ambrose Bierce, Sarah Bernhardt, Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London, living their lives against the background of a picturesque town whose Barbary Coast harbored the sailors of every nation and whose forbidding Chinatown was a maze of opium dens and underground tunnels. As if drawn by some mysterious loadstone, talent and genius flocked in hundreds to the city by the Golden Gate toward the close of the last century.

### Memories of the Wasp

Every week during that period there came off the presses in San Francisco a brilliant little periodical known as *The Wasp*, founded in 1876, the first colored cartoon paper in America. It had as its contributors a mass of talent such as few journals have known. I was only 18 years old when I started in as cartoonist on *The Wasp*, and part of my job was to sketch the theatrical celebrities of the day on the stage and in their dressing rooms, as well as the literary glants on the lecture platform and in their favorite cafes and restaurants. Many of them I came to know very well, indeed, as they wandered into the editorial rooms of *The Wasp* with stories and poems, some of which have since become classics.

As regular as clockwork, Joaquin Miller, the Poet of the Sierras, would come in with a poem for which he received exactly \$3. I can still see him as he was then—long hair, straggling mustache, horribly shabby clothes. He was one of the most taciturn men that ever lived—he would just turn in his poem, receive his money and walk out without a word. He lived in a tumbledown shack in the hills back of Oakland and never let any one come near him. He was the perfect hermit.

I did have one luncheon with him, though, that I don't think I'll forget. I used to go sketching once a week or so at Berkeley, on the other side of the bay, and after I had

finished work I'd have luncheon at a queer little French place. One day when I ran into Joaquin Miller in Oakland I asked him to join me. We sat down at the table and the waiter asked Miller what he wished to order. I asked for a plain omelette while Miller sat there studying the menu. Finally he grunted, "Omelette soufflé." I most certainly didn't know what an omelette soufflé might be, and I'm sure that Miller didn't, either, because his jaw fell when, half an hour or so later, the waiter came staggering in with the biggest omelette I've ever seen. It was about half a yard wide, and cognac blazed merrily all over it.

The sad ending to the story is that the omelette soufflé alone cost \$3 and I had only \$1.50. I had to promise the proprietor to pay for my guest's luncheon the next time I came out.

On one occasion Miller drifted into *The Wasp* office. It was a week or so before Thanksgiving and he had evidently been marketing, as he

carried a long bag from which hung out all that was left of a chicken. He had shoved the chicken into the bag anyhow, and while he walked along the street lost in thought half a dozen dogs of the neighborhood had followed him, taking large nips at the fowl. I should say that they had gotten away with half of it.

Celebrities were thick around *The Wasp* office. Ambrose Bierce, the short-story writer, was a steady visitor. He was refined, scholarly and decidedly English in appearance. He produced wonderful stories at \$6 apiece. Mark Twain and Bret Harte contributed to our pages. So did Julius Kahn, later United States Senator, and Henry Cabot Lodge when he was in Congress.

### Odd Characters

In addition to the celebrities San Francisco around the '80s and '90s boasted of probably the oddest assortment of characters ever assembled in one town. There was Schneider Harris, who made an excellent living selling the old clothes that people gave him. He was a tiny, birdlike man, with the quaintest, queerest smile in the world. It was impossible to resist him when he asked for anything, and he was asking all the time. One of the first sketches I ever did was for my father's almanac—he published a year book and a weekly newspaper. The subject was Schneider, and the almanac was hardly off the press before Schneider appeared at our house.

"Mr. Saalburg, you made fun of me in your almanac," he announced, smiling from ear to ear. "You got any ole clothes to give me?" My father presented him with an armful of ancient suits, and two weeks later Schneider was back again.

"What can I do for you at this time?" my father asked.

"Mister Saalburg," said Schneider wistfully, "you owe me three dollars and a half. I had to have those suits you gave me cleaned and pressed." Yes, he got the three and a half.

There was also the famous Oofy Goofy to add to the list of 'Frisco's queer ones. Oofy Goofy was the name he had printed on his business cards—his livelihood was gained by permitting any one who paid a quarter to take a spank at him. In the saloons of evenings when San Francisco was making merry, Oofy Goofy raked in the quarters.

But a tragic night arrived for Professor Oofy Goofy. He wandered into a certain saloon distributing his cards and handed one to an extremely large and powerful gentleman who was standing at the bar. The gentleman smiled pleasantly. "Here's your quarter," he said. "Now just bend over and let me have a spank." Oofy Goofy went flying across the room like a comet when that hand hit him. He was completely knocked out—he never appeared in San Francisco again. His business was ruined. Who was it spanked him that terrific wallop? Oh, Oofy Goofy had just happened to run into John L. Sullivan.

We had the great "Emperor Norton," too. He

looked like Santa Claus—round, fat, white whiskered. He wandered about in a costume he must have picked up in some theatrical shop. It was a medley of uniforms—an Admiral's gold-laced hat, a General's coat, huge epaulets and strings of medals. He carried the world's largest knotted cane, and he never spoke to a soul. His favorite pastime was issuing proclamations in the name of Emperor Norton. He would go into a restaurant and hand the proprietor a proclamation, ordering a meal for the Emperor, and he always got it. Now and then he would declare a holiday for the city. People gave him

out where his best steaks were disappearing.

It was while I was on *The Examiner* that Homer Davenport, later to become celebrated as a cartoonist, sauntered in from some place in Oregon and asked for a job. "I'm an animal artist. I can draw any kind of animal," he announced. His brush even then was superb.

### Davenport's Humor

Davenport from the first showed a remarkable sense of humor. He was never happy unless playing a joke of some kind on some one. I remember that he and I had a solid iron cane, so heavy you could hardly lift it. Davenport used to wander down the aisle of a theatre and then suddenly drop the thing. It would hit the floor with the crash of an explosion and the whole house would go into a panic. He also used to like to stroll up to the driver of one of the old hansom cabs.

"Here," he would call to the cabby on the seat, "hold this thing while I look for an address." Up would go



Joseph Jefferson as Rip Van Winkle, Sketched From Life.



"Emperor" Norton, One of the Characters of Twain's Days.

money occasionally, but no one ever solved the mystery of where he lived or why he thought himself an emperor.

For three years I worked on *The Wasp*, doing a double-page cartoon in color, as well as both the front and back covers of the journal, and the lithograph work for all three. Those were days when artists certainly worked hard and long at their jobs. Then I joined the art department of *The Examiner*, whose staff included such men as Homer Davenport, Harrison Fisher, James Swinerton and W. W. Denslow.

### No Joke for the Cook

In one way, *The Wasp* office couldn't be touched by *The Examiner*, however. You see, the airshaft in *The Wasp's* rooms led straight down to the stove of a restaurant on the ground floor of the building. You could just put your head in the shaft and see steaks cooking a few floors below. There was a fellow named Lewis, a bright country lad doing comics for *The Wasp*, who used to fish for the steaks with a hook and line whenever he felt the need of a real meal. It was a gorgeous joke until the day that the cook came up with a cleaver to find

the iron cane in the air, the cabby would grab it and as often as not come tumbling down from the box, still clutching our mass of metal. Cab drivers were Davenport's pet victims. Night after night he would pop into a cab, give the driver some address miles away and then calmly step out the other door and go on to the next jehu and repeat the joke.

Denslow, who became widely known as a newspaper artist, arrived among us as a cowboy in a slouch hat and chaps and armed with a pair of guns. He was a wild-looking customer, so when he asked for a job it was given to him. Everybody was afraid he might shoot up the art department if he was refused.

The French chefs of San Francisco in those days would have made famous the name of any city. They ran marvelous places. Little restaurants like the Pup and the Foodle Dog, where you would see all the famous people of the day—Robert Louis Stevenson, Edwin Booth, Joseph Jefferson. For a dollar you could get a glorious meal, real wine included. Here is a sample of what we used to get at Campi's, where our crowd gathered: Cocktail, hors d'oeuvres, half a loaf of French bread, soup, fish, roast duck or quail,

(Continued on Page 23)

# OLD SAN FRANCISCO NOTABLES

(Continued from Page 17)

all kinds of vegetables, a bottle of red or white wine, omelet with burnt sugar or brandy, fruit, pastry, demi-tasse and a pony of brandy to end up with. What did such a banquet cost? Just 50 cents.

The famous "cocktail route" ran in those days from Sacramento and Montgomery Streets to Market and Powell, or thereabout—a mile and a half of convivial spots frequented by the literati and the Bohemians. One of its most noted places was the Crystal Palace, a saloon whose floor was made of real marble, with a silver dollar set in each square. Its pride was its splendid oil paintings.

The Barbary Coast was in full blast also. It was a paradise for artists and writers who were looking for types. Every kind of character could be found there—sailors, miners, vagabonds, adventurers. In the old Bella Union Theatre the toughest crowd in the world congregated. Out

in the bar miners fresh from the hills would throw gold nuggets around the floor and light their cigars with five-dollar bills. At that, there was little real crime in San Francisco, as the activities of the Vigilance Committee of former years were still fresh in memory. It had a way of settling with criminals that was very discouraging to them.

Almost every famous actor and actress played San Francisco in those days. I remember that Sarah Bernhardt made a trip through Chinatown with a few of us. It was a real Chinatown then—a labyrinth of tunnels and opium dives.

Jim Corbett—Gentleman Jim—was just a clerk in a bank then. He was fighting a bit locally with great success, and gave out an interview in which he said he would some day beat John L. Sullivan.

James Whitcomb Riley, the poet, was in and about San Francisco in the '90s. He was a wonderfully kind man, though a little morose at times. He used to come and sit down beside me while I was working and we became good friends.

Well, those times are all over now. The Wasp has gone, the queer characters have disappeared, famous folk are getting quite well spread over the country. But those were certainly golden days in old San Francisco while they lasted.

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