

# 1985: Bret Harte had his own Church Street retreat

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. The following column, titled "Bret Harte slept here: Church Street cottage was his hideaway" was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on May 19, 1985.*

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Was Bret Harte ever in Santa Cruz? Yes, he was. But unlike George Washington and the famous "he slept here" legends, Harte slept in one house only, at 81 Church Street.

For years after Harte left the United States and until the cottage was torn down, it was known by Santa Cruzans as "the Honeymoon Cottage."

Bret Harte and his bride, Anna Griswold, sister of the actress Mabel Griswold, spent their honeymoon in a modest cottage on Church Street. Local legend has it that Harte gave the first reading of his famous "Luck of Roaring Camp" by the fire-side there. And there are those who claimed that he wrote it or part of it here in Santa Cruz. Chances are that he did, although today no one can prove or disprove it.

The little house where he stayed on Church Street is gone now. It was located opposite the present City Hall; a new law office building stands

there today. The house was a quaint New England style place which stood beneath a large hawthorn tree and hid behind hedges of roses and shrubbery almost impossible to photograph. Old fashioned windows reached from floor to ceiling. Rooms had been added at intervals and floor levels varied a step or two in places. Harte was often seen sitting in the garden under the hawthorn tree, reading.

Known first as the "old Boston House," it became the residence of the William Millers in the early 1900s and was torn down in the 1930s.

Harte spent several vacations in the house in the early 1860s when he was an employee of Wells Fargo Express Company in San Francisco, and later when he was editor of the Overland Monthly.

From the Church Street retreat he made frequent forays back into the Santa Cruz Mountains where he claimed to receive inspiration for his writings.

Francis Bret Harte was born Aug. 25, 1836 in Albany, N.Y. His father was a professor of Greek at Albany College. Harte tried his hand at poetry at an early age but became discouraged when his parents derided his writing efforts. After his father died in 1854, he and his mother came to California.

Harte tried teaching briefly, and of course he tried mining with a view to a quick fortune. Most

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visitors to California did. However, his mining venture was short-lived. But his keen eye and ear absorbed everything he saw and heard, and his brain recorded it all for his future literary projects.

All the nuances of the rough and ready mining camps he lived in, and their characters, both native and foreign, were imprinted vividly on his brain. He spent time in the vicinity of Sonora and Mariposa, witnessing several hangings and he lived for a time in a two-story "house" next to the ill-famed "Hanging Tree" on Big Oak Flat Road. He pitched his tent beside camp fires, rode the swaying stage coaches between camps, and met a friendly young writer named Mark Twain and a bitterly caustic one named Ambrose Bierce.

Finally Harte took a newspaper job in Sonora where he worked in the composing room, selecting and placing the metal type to create the stories to be printed. Slow and tedious work compared to today's computerized process.

Harte went to San Francisco in 1857 and while setting type on the "Golden Era," a short-lived publication, he began to write anonymous sketches of his mining camp adventures. Soon they attracted attention and he was invited to join a group of writers. He became associated with the management of the "Californian," another short-lived venture in a weekly. In July, 1868, publication of "The Overland Monthly" began with Harte as

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organizer and editor.

In the second issue, he printed "The Luck of Roaring Camp" which had been refused by several publishers. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" and other stories followed, and Harte's reputation took wing.

In 1871 his "Plain Language From Truthful Jones" also known as "The Heathen Chinese" appeared. This particular bit of writing caused him much sorrow because it led people to believe he was anti-Chinese, which he wasn't.

Harte went to New York in 1871 to work on the Atlantic Monthly but his stories in those later years never won the popularity of his earlier pieces.

In 1878 he was appointed consul to Krefeld, Germany, where he remained until 1880 when he was transferred to Glasgow, Scotland. In 1885 he moved to London where he led a social life and continued to write. He never returned to the United States and died in England in 1902.