

A glance at history

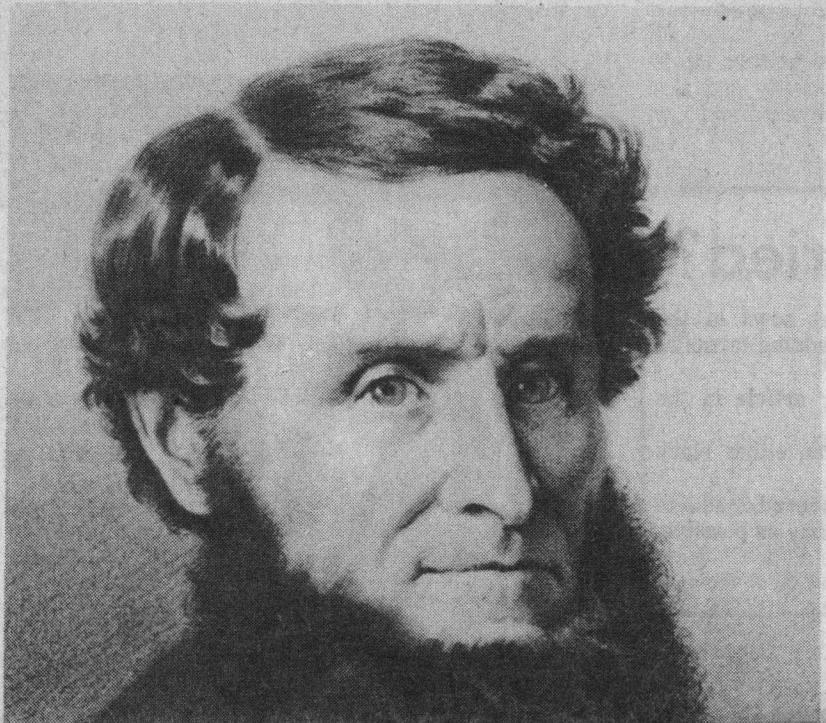
*HISTORY*  
**The agnostic who brought the heavens to earth**

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COMETS, rockets, shooting stars, falling stars — whatever you want to call them, they have always been a source of fascination to mankind. James Lick was a strange, stubborn, moody man who is remembered for "bringing the heavens down to earth" with his gift of Lick Observatory and its original 36-inch telescope. The Santa Clara County mountain-top observatory was founded in 1874 with Lick's gift of \$700,000, a sizeable amount in those days, and was completed in 1888. Lick had seriously considered Mount Bache (Loma Prieta) as the site before choosing Mount Hamilton. (In 1964 the administration of the observatory which is under the University of California, was moved to the UCSC campus.) It was a magnificent gift, but even it pointed up the millionaire agnostic's irascible temperament. In 1874, when Lick set up a number of bequests and gifts, including the observatory, he was 77 years old and believed his health was failing. He made arrangements for a board of trustees to handle his affairs. The following year, 1875, he felt a lot healthier and decided to do away with the trustees as he wanted to run his own affairs. This led to hassles with the trustees over the first trust deed for the observatory.



Lick Observatory on Mount Hamilton — 4,200 feet above sea level — is reached by a road said to have 300 curves. Horses and buggies of James Lick's day have given way to today's automobiles.



When Lick issued an edict stating that his "improved health" now enabled him to take part in executing his own affairs and that he wished to make changes and improvements in the original deed, the trustees balked.

Lick refused to budge and lengthy lawsuits threatened. Lick was resigned to long-drawn out litigation until Attorney John Felton stepped in. Operating on Lick's behalf, for a fee of \$100,000, Felton wrote a series of articles for San Francisco newspapers, hinting at doubtful motives on the part of the trustees who refused to resign. Public sentiment forced the issue and Lick got rid of

ed over to them in 1888, 12 years after Lick's death.

Lick never lived to see the final step in his great plan to study the heavens, but he lies buried at the base of the 36-inch telescope, one of his last requests.

Building the road to the observatory required an Act of Congress, as it lay on government land, and when it was built, it was said to have more than 300 curves. It cost \$100,000.

The eccentric millionaire wasn't always rich. He was born in Fredericksburg, Penn., Aug. 25, 1796, the son of a poor German family. The original family name was Luk.

on greener pastures in the Santa Clara valley. He invested heavily and built a flour mill — the likes of which had never been seen before and probably never will be again. The interior of the mill was completely finished in rare wood paneling, much of it the work of Lick himself, and the natives wondered if the man had lost his marbles. They probably didn't know that there was a story behind the extravagant "Mahogany Mill."

As a boy, Lick had been apprenticed first to a miller who had a pretty daughter. Lick courted the girl but was dismissed by her father as a worthless, penniless young beg-

Dissension seemed to follow Lick wherever he went, even into his grave. A nephew contested the will; an illegitimate son came west to claim his share. Lick had never denied the existence of that son who had lived and worked with him for a few years.

The Lick House in San Francisco, where Lick died, was famed for its fine wood paneling. It stood until the earthquake and fire of 1906. The 'quake also damaged one of the observatory buildings but the 36-inch telescope is still there, along with newer more modern instruments which include the giant 120-inch reflecting telescope. It was the second



James Lick gave \$700,000 to found Lick Observatory.

until Attorney John Felton stepped in. Operating on Lick's behalf, for a fee of \$100,000, Felton wrote a series of articles for San Francisco newspapers, hinting at doubtful motives on the part of the trustees who refused to resign. Public sentiment forced the issue and Lick got rid of his stubborn trustees.

When Attorney Felton presented his bill for services rendered, Lick reverted to character. He argued that since the case had been settled so quickly and easily, Felton should reduce his fee. Felton answered by telling Lick a joke about a cut-rate tooth-puller who did the dentist's job so much cheaper — but dislocated the patient's jaw in the process. Lick took the joke in silence and paid.

On Sept. 21, 1875, Lick issued a new deed of trust and on Nov. 1 a request was sent to the UC Regents, asking them to take over and operate the observatory. The Regents accepted and the observatory was turn-

have more than 300 curves. It cost \$100,000.

The eccentric millionaire wasn't always rich. He was born in Fredericksburg, Penn., Aug. 25, 1796, the son of a poor German family. The original family name was Luk. James was apprenticed to a piano and organ maker and worked at that craft in Baltimore. When he attempted to start his own business in New York and failed because of lack of capital, he left for South America where he worked and prospered until 1848. That year he sailed into San Francisco Bay aboard the Lady Adams with a large iron box containing \$30,000 in gold doubloons.

San Francisco was a village of about 1,000 persons, had just changed its name from Yerba Buena and was on its way to becoming an important seaport.

The wily Lick invested in real estate there and built the once-famous Lick House hotel, then cast his eye

"Mahogany Mill."

As a boy, Lick had been apprenticed first to a miller who had a pretty daughter. Lick courted the girl but was dismissed by her father as a worthless, penniless young beggar. Lick left, but he promised to become rich some day in the future — rich enough to build a mill of his own — the finest ever constructed.

Today, it's unknown whether this story is fact or fiction but it's a fact that Lick had his "Mahogany Mill" photographed inside and out and he sent the photos back east to the miller of his boyhood acquaintance.

His reasons for building the observatory are obscure, but in 1874 a great deal of publicity was given to the Washington Observatory which was completed that year.

He also endowed an orphanage in San Jose and grateful citizens named a school and, later, a freeway for him.

'quake also damaged one of the observatory buildings but the 36-inch telescope is still there, along with newer more modern instruments which include the giant 120-inch reflecting telescope. It was the second largest in the world when it was installed in 1959. The efforts of Lick astronomers over the past nearly 100 years have given mankind some noted discoveries in the heavens and the observatory also serves as a major training ground for advanced students of astronomy.

The paradoxical twist to the whole story is this: James Lick, giver of the wonderful observatory which stands 4200 feet above sea level on Mount Hamilton, is the man who is remembered for "bringing the heavens down to earth" and yet he did not believe in "heaven" as such. He was known for his lack of belief in life after death.