

# Daily Alta California, Volume 26, Number 8855, 30 June 1874

## JAMES LICK AS A PIANO-MAKER

From the Philadelphia Bulletin of June 19th.

In the Bulletin of June 11th appeared an article copied from the ALTA CALIFORNIA of June 4th, in which a full account was given of the conveyance by James Lick, of San Francisco, of property to the value of \$2,000,000 for the benefit of charitable and educational institutions, and for the adornment of the "Golden City." An extract from the article quoted reads as follows: James Lick yesterday gave nearly all his property, supposed to amount to about two million dollars, to public educational, charitable and ornamental purposes. It is one of the greatest gifts for the public benefit on record, and we believe it will be a source of benefit and enjoyment to a greater number of persons than any similar benefaction on record, unless it be that of George Peabody. Girard College and the Astor Library are small affairs as compared with the institutions which Mr. Lick's liberality will found or endow with new life." Then followed a short biographical sketch of how James Lick accumulated so much wealth. Perhaps this would have ended the matter, so far as the people on this side of the Rocky Mountains were concerned, had not a reporter of the Bulletin chanced to meet with an old resident of this city who knew LICK, OF LEBANON In the "Auld Lang Syne," and who related the following interesting particulars, which we know will be new to our readers, and we believe news to the people of the Pacific Slope. Among our German citizens Conrad Meyer is well known, while his general popularity as a manufacturer of fine pianos, is second to none in the country, not even Steinway or Chickering. Of the millionaire philanthropist of the land beyond the Sierras, Mr. Meyer speaks in the most glowing terms, and it is to him that we are indebted for the information following : "In the year 1819, just fifty-five years ago, I arrived in Baltimore and obtained employment of Joseph Hiskey, then a prominent piano manufacturer of that city. In Baltimore I first met James Lick, who is of German descent, born in or near Lebanon, Pa. We worked together in one room and on the most friendly terms. In 1820, I left Baltimore for Savannah, Ga., but partly owing to the prevalence of the yellow fever, I in August returned to Baltimore at the request of my former employer, Mr. Hiskey. Lick had left, and I learned that he had gone to New York and started in business for himself.

## AS A MANUFACTURER OF PIANOS

Hearing of my return to Baltimore, he wrote, inviting me to accompany him to Buenos Ayres. Being sick of travelling, I declined, and soon after came to this city. Seven years later I was in business on my own account on Fifth street, near Prune, (now Locust) , when I was suddenly surprised one day at seeing James Lick walk in. He had just arrived from South America, and had brought with him hides and nutria skins to the amount of \$40,000, which he was then disposing of. Nutria skins are obtained from a species of otter, found along the River La Plata. He stated that he intended settling in Philadelphia, and to this end, he some days later rented a house on Eighth street, near Arch, with the intention of manufacturing pianos, paying four hundred dollars as rental for one year, in advance. In a few days he left for New York and Boston, and writing me from the latter city, announced that he had given up the idea of remaining permanently in Philadelphia, and requested that I should call on the house agent and make the best settlement I could with him. I did so, and receiving from him three hundred, out of the four hundred dollars, I returned the key. Perhaps to this little transaction alone is San Francisco indebted for the munificent gifts which have lately brought James Lick prominently before the people of the United States and the world. Had he settled in Philadelphia he might possibly have amassed a fortune, but then the probabilities are that San Francisco would never have seen him or known the use of a penny of his money.

"When Mr. Lick returned from Boston he purchased three pianos of me for shipment to Buenos Ayres, and upon the day of his sailing for Valparaiso he handed me a United States bank note of the denomination of \$100, saying he would want some more pianos. Soon after his arrival I received a draft and an order for some more pianos and shipped them to him at Valparaiso.

"Twelve or fifteen more years passed, and I heard no more of him, and had begun to believe that he was numbered with the dead, when I one day received a letter in his own hand-writing, enclosing an order for between \$1,300 and \$1,400 in Spanish doubloons, the same being brought to the port of New York by a Government war vessel.

The fact of James Lick thus entrusting him with so much money, and forwarding it to him without any certainty of his being in existence, was the source of much pleasure to the sturdy old German as he recited the narrative to which we are giving publicity.

"The money was intended as payment for an order for the inside work, or action, for 12 upright pianos, which I soon had finished and shipped to him at Lima, Peru.

"Years rolled on, and again I had given him up as dead, when in 1869, I received a letter from him, dated at San Jose, California." As this epistle is, in the first part, more of a business than confidential nature, we give the following extract

therefrom, to show WHAT JAMES LICK KNOWS ABOUT PIANOS. "SAN JOSE, December 17th. 1872. -- Mr. C. Meyer, Philadelphia -- Dear Sir : I have this day forwarded by the Central Pacific railroad to your address one case containing 100 feet laurel wood veneer, and a ne plus ultra sound-board wood, and a model or pattern, showing the best way of putting on the ribs on sound-boards -- that is, according to my experience in upright pianos -- and a package for Joseph Long. Please send it to him by express as soon as you receive it. The box is also made of ne plus ultra sound-board wood, fastened with screws to save all the wood.

"I think you will find the ne plus ultra the most extraordinary wood for sound-boards you ever did use. I can, however, only speak confidently of the soft kind. I got a few pieces of it from a Captain of a vessel from Peru; it was very soft, and I could only use it for a few octaves in the base. It did make the most powerful and also the sweetest tone I ever did hear, without exception, in all my long experience in pianos. Make your sound-board in the base very thin, not over one-eighth of an inch thick, and do not cut in your ribs Joseph Hiskey fashion. You want all the elasticity and vibration you can get in your sounding-board, and do not make your bridge too high, else you will check the elasticity of your sound-board. You have a collection of wood of all degrees of hardness, so that you can tune your soundboard, with a little care, octave by octave, from one end to the other. Use the softest wood in the base. I am certain you have a good thing if you can keep it to yourself, and not let anybody else know anything about it, not even your workmen. If I were in your place I would prepare the wood before I would give it to them, by dyeing it in dyer's kettles. I would have my own kettle, and buy my dye from a dyer.

"I think firm ribs will do. That will deceive them in regard to the sound board. They will think the secret consist in the color. Make me a new piano for my parlor of the Lick House. Do not make It all of laurel wood, but judiciously and skillfully distribute it in panels and borders. My dining-room doors are made in that style. The effect is beautiful. The doors are thirteen feet by five." "Since then," continued our informant, "we have corresponded freely, and often has he urged me to visit California." What is your general opinion of the man; has he made this gift for the purpose of notoriety, or from sincere motives? queried we. "James Lick does not seek notoriety. He is one of the most modest, self-retiring men I ever met. Oh, no! he makes the gift from the heart."

"He is a good, honest man, and believes everybody else to be honest," and as proof of his belief Mr. Meyer again recited the circumstance of the doubloons, and again the recital caused his countenance to glow with pleasure. Such are a few plain facts concerning the good man of San Francisco, whom we have called "Lick " of Lebanon. They are told just as received, without garnishing, the writer keeping in view the knowledge that the subject of the

sketch is a plain, blunt man, whose whole life has been one of unflagging energy, and whose latest act is glory enough for him, both now and in the hereafter.

