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Although he was born in New York State and lived most of his life there and in Europe, Bret Harte is remembered as the man who made the West a favorite realm of fiction. As a young man he went to California, had a brief experience as a miner, and then became a San Francisco journalist. His real fame came while he was editor of *The Overland Monthly*, and it was in this periodical that his most popular works first appeared.

"The Luck of Roaring Camp" made an immediate appeal, and it is still the favorite among his stories. Not only was it one of the first literary presentations of a colorful section of the country, but it exploited the popular conception that rough exteriors hide hearts of gold. Harte's other two successful stories followed this formula of nobility coming out in desperate characters. The sacrificial deaths of a prostitute and a gambler are told in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," and in "Tennessee's Partner" Harte relates the beautiful friendship between a highway robber and his rough partner.

Where did he get much of his information and background for his stories? Union—now Arcata, Humboldt County—was the town in Northern California where Bret Harte spent three years—1857 to 1860. This period has been described as the "Three Lost Years of Bret Harte's Life." Here in Union Harte gained much experience in writing and frontier life, but for the remainder of his life he cared little to discuss this part of his life because of the unfortunate circumstances which had occurred.

At the age of twenty-one Harte came by steamer to Union from San

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Francisco to see his sister, Margaret Wyman.² The settlement, numbering approximately five hundred inhabitants, was called Union or Uniontown, although later in March, 1860, the name would be changed to Arcata. The town stood at the northern end of Humboldt Bay, snuggled against the first ridge of the Coast Mountains, and in 1857—only seven years removed from the wilderness—consisted of one brick building and many of wood. There were the usual dirt streets, a church or two, stores, saloons, and a long pier extending out across the tide flats. A few tall redwoods stood in the outskirts, and some great stumps—ten to fourteen feet in diameter—studded the town. To the south were the mud flats and the bay. On the other sides there was a narrow fringe of cleared land and beyond that one of the most magnificent forests in the world—unbroken miles of gigantic redwoods.

There were some logging, farming, and cattle raising in the vicinity, but the town really existed as a point of reshipment. Goods were unloaded from the steamers and forwarded by pack train to the populous mining district on the Trinity River.³ This traffic, however, was already declining and the town was threatened with ruin because shippers had discovered a cheaper route by way of Red Bluff, the head of navigation on the Sacramento River.⁴

The people of Union were a varied group. Indians lounged about, peaceful and dirty, demoralized by the sudden disruption of their normal life. Rough cattlemen and mule packers loitered in the saloons. Miners passed through on their way to the mines, or came to town to spend their gold on a drunk. There was also a small class of stable and respectable people who carried on the business and professional life, went to church, sent their children to school, attended the Lyceum debates, and worked toward the establishment of a civilized community.

What were the conditions in this rugged country of northwestern California? The struggle between the Indian and the white man was long and bloody and raged from 1851 to 1865. The peak of the Indian "wars" in Northern California was reached during the Civil War, and did not come to a climax until 1865.

The frontier has always had a noble, vigorous, intelligent, hardy pioneer population, but at the same time it has had a mean, shiftless, ignorant, vicious, and treacherous element of brutes, who boasted that they were white men and were armed ready to back up their assertions.

This class on all our frontiers has been the main cause of many of the Indian troubles, and Humboldt County was no exception. They ran rough-shod over all the Indians' rights: they stole and outraged his women, and they shot him down if he raised the slightest objection. Some Indian tribes had vigor enough to resent such mistreatment and took revenge. In such cases innocent whites often suffered severely for their inability to control the vicious element of their own race.

Here in Humboldt County the Indians made but little resistance, yet were frequently killed for the most trivial of causes. Not only was there the occasional killing of small numbers of Indians, but between 1850 and 1873 a considerable number of slaughters, either by state troops or by unauthorized "volunteer companies," occurred on such a scale as to be dignified by the term of "Indian Wars."

A common practice of these companies was to make a daybreak attack on some Indian ranchería and kill all its inhabitants without regard to age or sex, unless perhaps they spared one or two of the younger females of pleasing appearance to take along with them.

Often a few men followed these companies for the special purpose of taking possession of young women or children whose parents were killed, and selling them in the centers of population either for immoral purposes or as servants. According to a state law Indians could be made apprentices or indentured to citizens for terms of ten to fifteen years. It may or may not have been intended for the good of the Indians to teach them the arts of civilization, but in practice it encouraged the kidnapping and sanctioned virtual slavery for the young and ablebodied, while the old and worn-out were left to shift for themselves.

Humboldt County had its full share of hunters, cattle thieves, and kidnappers; and several campaigns, similar to examples given, were conducted in the Bald Hills—northeast of Humboldt Bay—during the years from 1858 to 1864. These campaigns led to the undoing of the Wiyot or Coast Indians who lived on the land in and around the bay.

The Indians in the mountains east of the bay were described as having more spirit than the Indians about Humboldt Bay. These Indians committed depredations in order to survive. The Americans had slaughtered their game, and then had brought cattle to their prairies which ate up their supply of seeds for food.

Campaigns by volunteer companies, state troops, and federal troops

continued for several years against the Bald Hills Indians because of their depredations on the stock. Prisoners were taken to the reservations and starved and abused until they returned to their native haunts, only to be chased off again to some reservation in a fresh campaign.

Reports can be found of one white man on the Van Duzen River who boasted of having killed sixty infants with his own hatchet at different slaughtering grounds. This vicious white man was a leader and model of a certain class of settlers on the Van Duzen and Eel rivers, just south of Eureka. These men not only went about the country attacking villages at early dawn and slaughtering the inhabitants of all ages and sexes, but they threatened and terrorized their more peaceable white neighbors. The sheriff and the editor of the Humboldt *Times* of Eureka, the county seat, were their friends; and they became so bold that certain of their number threatened to "clean out" the small number of federal soldiers who had been sent to Eel River in answer to a petition of the better class of citizens desiring protection for both themselves and the friendly Indians.

Such were the conditions between the whites and Indians when Bret Harte lived in Union. Charles A. Murdock recalled their association at that time:

He was twenty one and I was sixteen, so there was little intimacy, but he interested and attracted me as a new type of manhood. He bore the marks of good breeding, education, and refinement. He was quiet of manner, kindly, but not demonstrative, with a certain reserve and aloofness. He was of medium height rather slight of figure, with strongly marked features and an aquiline nose.... He had a very pleasant voice . . . and never talked of himself. . . . He was dressed in good taste, but was evidently in need of income. He was willing to do anything. . . . He was simply untrained for doing anything that needed doing in that community. 10

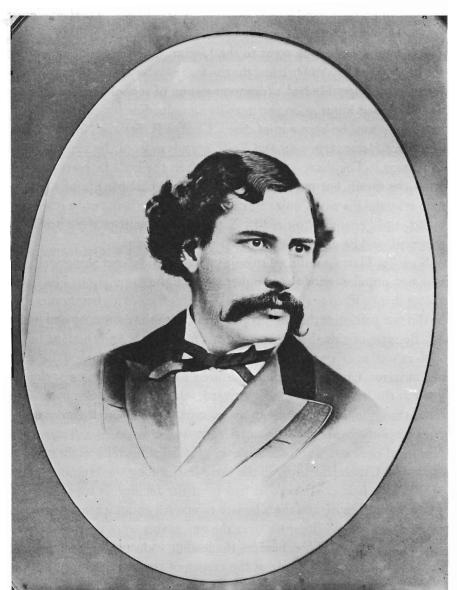
At first Harte found occasional work in the drugstore, and for a time he had a small private school. He had little mechanical ability, according to Murdock, who recalled an incident: "He bravely dug postholes, but they were pretty poor, and the completed fence was not very straight." Harte was an agreeable guest, and was fond of playing whist. He also had a sense of humor. One day while Harte and Murdock were walking together, they passed a new house "destitute of all ornaments or trim-

ming" which resembled a packing box. "That," Harte remarked, "must be of the Iowan order of architecture." 12

In October, 1857, he went to the Liscom ranch in the "bottom" at the head of the bay and became the tutor of two boys, fourteen and thirteen years of age. He had a forenoon session of school and in the afternoon enjoyed hunting on the near-by sloughs. For his convenience in keeping lessons he kept a brief diary. George R. Stewart, in his biography, Bret Harte Argonaut and Exile, reveals most of the important information. The diary is of interest both in the little he recorded and from the significant omissions. It shows a very simple life of a young man who did his work, enjoyed his outdoor recreation, read a few good books, and generally "retired by 9:30 p.m." His entries were brief and practical, and he did not write to express his feelings.

Socially, Harte continued to enjoy himself and to get along well. He was not popular with the rougher part of the population. His diary shows that he liked to drink whiskey with his friends in their homes, but he did not patronize the saloons and drink with the cattlemen and packers. Because of this they sneered at his fine clothes and thought him a snob as well as effeminate. But Harte had many friends among the leading citizens: Charles Murdock admired him, and he was a welcome guest at the home of Alexander Brizard, whose trading posts were scattered throughout the mountainous country of Humboldt County.¹⁴

In 1858 the leading citizens of Union began to view with alarm the decline of their town and the advance of its rival, Eureka, eight miles to the south. Union had enjoyed the early lead among the Humboldt Bay towns. The first consideration had been the facility in supplying the mines on the Trinity and the Klamath rivers. All goods were transported by pack trains, and the trails over the mountains were nearer the head of the bay. Lumber soon became the leading industry, and the mills at Eureka were on deep water at the center of the bay, making that the natural shipping point. Two years before, Eureka had captured the county seat; now the county's only newspaper followed. The people of Union decided that they needed some type of journal to make up for the lost Humboldt *Times*, for even a small weekly would increase their town's prestige and give publicity to the project of a wagon road to the Trinity River, which might restore to Union the reshipment trade. Colonel S. G. Whipple and Major Charles Murdock founded *The*



Courtesy of the Society of California Pioneers

BRET HARTE Shortly after his meteoric rise to fame

Northern Californian, a small four-page country weekly, which had a brief but colorful existence. The office was in a small frame building facing the Plaza which was approximately in the center of town.¹⁵

Bret Harte at twenty-two was hired as a printer's devil, but later began to help with the editorial work. Murdock told how this happened:

My father was a half owner, and I coveted the humble position of printer's devil. One journeyman could set the type, and on Wednesday and Saturday respectively, run off on a handpress the outside and inside of the paper, but a boy or a low-priced man was needed to roll the forms and likewise to distribute the type. I looked upon it as the first rung on the ladder of journalism, and I was about to put my foot thereon when the pathetic figure of Bret Harte presented itself applying for the job, causing me to put my foot on my hopes instead. He seemed to want it and need it so much more than I did that I turned my hand to other pursuits, while he mounted the ladder with cheerful alacrity and skipped up several rungs, very promptly learning to set type and becoming a very acceptable assistant editor.¹⁶

Within a year Harte was almost an associate editor, since Colonel Whipple had to leave often on business. Harte was left in full charge and accepted the responsibility willingly. He was very happy in his surroundings, and he wrote constantly. While much of his writings during this time was unsigned, it can easily be identified by one familiar with his style. And across the stage of this frontier town passed the miners, the gamblers, the traders, the prostitutes—the outcasts.

Harte's peaceful writing days on the paper were suddenly interrupted in a dramatic manner. Harte was left in charge when Colonel Whipple went to San Francisco on business trips. Whipple left for San Francisco again at the end of February, 1860, leaving Harte in charge as usual. There had been disturbing news from Eureka on Sunday, and on Monday the Colonel stopping there en route sent back a report for the paper. What had happened was the climactic act of barbarity and inhumanity on the part of a half dozen vicious whites from the southern part of the county.

From the earliest times of settlement in California and Oregon, Indians had been killed for the most trivial of causes. All the newspapers during the years previous to 1860 teemed with the words "annihilation" and "extermination." The popular doctrine of Manifest Destiny supported this philosophy. This meant that the Anglo-Saxons—the

chosen people-should kill the original inhabitants and possess the land.

The Indians had their friends among the newspapers as well as among individual whites, and these people tried to protect the Indians. On the other hand there were newspapers that openly advocated extermination. These poisoned public opinion by developing race prejudice and charging every possible crime against the Indians. Thus shielded and encouraged, the rougher element among the whites gradually went from bad to worse.

The storekeepers and stable townspeople remained on good terms with the peaceful Wiyot Indians, but back in the mountainous country both whites and Indians were growing bitter and violent in action. The sight of an occasional murdered settler gave the cattlemen and the general riffraff of the frontier ample excuse for shooting Indians.

The Wiyot tribe on the coast were harmless, but were thought to be allied with the belligerent mountain tribes. Nevertheless, an Indian was an Indian. There was a large ranchería of peaceful Indians on an island—now called Gunther Island—separated from the town of Eureka by only a narrow channel. At the end of February the inhabitants of the island and nearby rancherías celebrated a religious festival which called for a three-day feast and a dance. At the end of the ordeal the exhausted Indians lay down to sleep.

About four o'clock Sunday morning five or six men came to the island armed with guns, hatchets, and knives. The tired Indians were caught sleeping in their houses. Mercilessly the men used their hatchets on the old and young: women, children, and infants. The men knew—apparently for religious reasons—that most of the men had left the island. Their work was rapid and efficient. They killed approximately sixty Indians, mostly women and children, either sleeping or attempting to escape. Two other rancherías, one on the South Beach near the entrance to the bay and one near the mouth of Eel River, were visited on the same night, in the same stealthy manner and with the same result. This was the famous massacre of February 26, 1860, reports of which were even printed in the newspapers of New York City.

When Colonel Whipple sent back his report and continued on to San Francisco, he placed Harte in a desperate situation. Harte did not visit the island which could be seen from Union, but he saw the mangled corpses unloaded from canoes as the remnant of the Mad River Indians passed through Union bearing home their dead. He was shocked when he saw the brutally mutilated bodies, and it made him furious to think that people of his own race could be such barbarians.

The excitement was intense. Could Harte publish what he felt? In the absence of his boss, he could decline to comment editorially on the shocking event. The massacre was on Sunday, and the paper was to appear on Wednesday. Harte knew the situation: he could expect some support from the townspeople, but the packers, miners, cattlemen, and loggers disliked the Indians and cared little for him. And the rougher element would not hesitate to shoot or lynch a writer who dared to oppose them.

On February 29 The Northern Californian left no doubt of what Harte thought of the massacre and its perpetrators. He bitterly attacked the whites responsible for the outrage. In bold type he headed his editorial:

INDISCRIMINATE MASSACRE OF INDIANS WOMEN AND CHILDREN BUTCHERED²⁰

The names of the murderers were not mentioned in the account, but the words used left no doubt of Harte's feelings:

Our Indian troubles have reached a crisis. Today we record acts of Indian aggression and white retaliation. It is a humiliating fact that the parties who may be supposed to represent white civilization have committed the greater barbarity. But before we review the causes that have led to this crowning act of reckless desperation, let us remind the public at a distance from this savage-ridden district, that the secrecy of this indiscriminate massacre is an evidence of its disavowal and detestation by the community. The perpetrators are yet unknown.

The friendly Indians about the bay have been charged with conveying arms and ammunition to the mountain tribes, and receiving slaughtered beef as a reward. A class of hard-working men who derive their subsistence by cattle raising have been the greatest sufferers, and if in the blind fury of retaliation they spare neither age or sex, though they cannot be excused, a part of the blame should fall upon that government which places the responsibility of self defense on the injured party.... If the deed was committed by responsible parties, we will give place to any argument that may be offered in justification. But we cannot conceive of no palliation for women and child slaughter. We can conceive of no wrong that a babe's blood can atone for. Perhaps we do not rightly understand the doctrine of "extermination."... What amount of suffering it takes to make a man a babe-killer, is a question for future moralists. What will justify it, should be a question of

present law. . . . An "irrepressible conflect" is really here. Knowing this, was the policy to commence the work of extermination with the most peaceful? And what assistance can be expected from a legislature already perplexed with doubts and suspicion, in the face of the bloody record we today publish? . . . But when the facts were generally known, it appeared that out of some 60 or 70 killed on the Island, at least 50 or 60 were women and children. Neither age or sex had been spared. Little children and old women were mercilessly stabbed and their skulls crushed with axes. When the bodies were landed at Union, a more shocking and revolting spectacle never was exhibited to the eyes of a Christian and civilized people. Old Women wrinkled and decrepit lay weltering in blood, their brains dashed out and dabbled with their long grey hair. Infants scarce a span long, with their faces cloven with hatchets and their bodies ghastly with wounds. We gathered from the survivors that four or five white men attacked the ranches at about four o'clock in the morning, which statement is corroborated by people at Eureka who heard pistol shots at about the same time, although no knowledge of the attack was public. With the Indians who lived on the Island, some thirty from the mouth of Mad River were staying, having attended a dance the evening previous. They were all killed with the exception of some few who hid themselves during the massacre. No resistance was made, it is said, to the butchers who did the work, but as they ran or huddled together for protection like sheep, they were struck down with hatchets. Very little shooting was done, most of the bodies having wounds about the head. The bucks were mostly absent, which accounts for the predominance of female victims.

On Monday we received a statement from our Senior, at Eureka en route for San Francisco. He says that about nine o'clock he visited the Island, and there a horrible scene was presented. The bodies of 36 women and children, recently killed, lay in and near the several ranches. They were of all ages from the child of but two or three years to the old skeleton squaw. From appearances most of them must have been killed with axes or hatchets—as the heads and bodies of many were gashed, as with such an instrument. It was a sickening and pitiful sight. Some five or six were still alive and one old woman was able to talk, though dreadfully wounded. Dr. Lee visited them and dressed the wounds of those alive. . . . It is not generally known that more than three bucks were killed, though it is supposed there must have been 15 or 20. It is thought that the bodies of the men were taken away by Indians early this morning as four canoes were seen to leave the Island.

On the beach south of the entrance it is reported that from 30 to 50 were killed. It is also reported, that at Bucksport, all were killed that were there. I passed in sight of them about 11 o'clock and saw the ranches on fire. It is also said that the same has been done at the several ranches on Eel river.

No one seems to know who was engaged in this slaughter, but it is supposed to have been men who have suffered from depredations so long on the Eel river and vicinity.

Indian Island is scarcely one mile from Eureka the County seat of Humboldt

County. With the exception of the conjectures that the Indians on this Island offer aid and assistance to mountain Indians, they are peaceful and industrious, and seem to have perfect faith in the good will of the whites. Many of them are familiar to our citizens. "Bill," of Mad river, 21 a well-known and intelligent fellow, has proven a faithful ally to the white men on several occasions and has had his wife, mother, sister, two brothers, and two little children cruelly butchered by men of that race whom he had learned to respect and esteem. 22

It was never publicly known who the white men were who were engaged in the crime, since none were brought to trial. Many were suspected, but they were shielded by persons of position and authority. No one dared to accuse these men openly. The most that was ever done to promote justice was the writing of numerous anonymous letters to the San Francisco newspapers. From these letters it appeared that some of the murderers were from the Eel River region and some were members of Seaman Wright's Company of Volunteers.²³

An incident which occurred three days later did not help Bret Harte's situation. This was an article on the massacre which was published in The Humboldt *Times* in Eureka. The editor, Austin Wiley, was prejudiced against the Indians, and he wrote the following:

There are men in this county, as there may be elsewhere, where the Government allows these degraded diggers to roam at large, and plunder and murder without restraint, who have been perfectly desperate, and we have here some of the fruits of that desperation. They have friends or relatives cruelly and savagely butchered, their homes made desolate, and their hard-earned property destroyed by these sneaking, cowardly wretches; and when an attempt it made to hunt them from hiding places in the mountains, to administer punishment upon them, they escape to the friendly ranches on the coast for protection. When appeals are made for aid in protecting their lives and property, they are met by contumely and reproach. Their brethren in other parts of the State, many of whom approve of hanging up white men without "due process of law" for much less crimes than these diggers have committed, heap ridicule upon them and shed crocodile tears over the "poor Indians."²⁴

Colonel Whipple, who hurried back to Union, found it impossible to stem the tide rising against his associate who dared to take the part of the Indians against the whites. Within a month Harte left Union for San Francisco. There can be little doubt that he probably departed by request. There are many stories which cannot be documented. One popular story in Arcata which old timers still tell is that he waited with two

pistols for a mob that was going to lynch him. Another story is that a troop of United States Cavalry arrived just in time to drag Harte from the vengeance of a mob who were going to lynch him.²⁵ Charles A. Murdock, the best source, mentioned that "Harte was seriously threatened and in no little danger."²⁶ On March 26, 1860, Harte left Union and Humboldt County on the steamer *Columbia*.²⁷

On March 28, Editor Whipple printed the following in his editorial column:

Mr. F. B. Harte—This young gentleman, who has been engaged in this office from the commencement of the paper, left for San Francisco a few days ago, where he intends to reside in the future. In addition to being a printer, Mr. Harte is a good writer. He has often contributed to the columns of this paper, and at different times when we have been absent, has performed the editorial labors. He is a warm-hearted, genial companion, and a gentleman in every sense of the word. We wish our friend, the success to which his talents entitle him, and cordially commend him to the fraternity of the Bay City. 28

Harte profited by his experiences here in Arcata, gaining the local color which was different from that of the Sierra foothills. His newspaper experience was a great advantage to him because he had learned a trade in which there was a demand. When Harte returned to San Francisco from Arcata, he obtained employment with *The Golden Era* as a typesetter, and within a few weeks began to contribute. This magazine became the doorway to his career. He later joined the *Californian* where he became the star contributor.

In 1868 Anton Roman, a San Francisco bookseller and publisher, selected Harte editor of *The Overland Monthly*, a new magazine to be written entirely by local talent.²⁹ "The Luck of Roaring Camp," "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," and "Tennessee's Partner," the best stories that he was ever to write and the ones responsible for his reputation to this day, were printed in this magazine.

NOTES

- 1. Sophie Whipple Root, "Three Lost Years of Bret Harte's Life," *The Overland Monthly* (October, 1932), p. 229. Mrs. Root's father was Colonel S. G. Whipple, one of the founders of *The Northern Californian*, the newspaper for which Bret Harte worked at Union, now Arcata.
 - 2. Charles A. Murdock, A Backward Glance at Eighty, p. 73.
 - 3. The Humboldt Times, October 4, 18, 1856.
 - 4. Isaac Cox, The Annals of Trinity County, pp. 29-30.
- 5. Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of California, XXIV, 477, says that California "cannot grace her annals with a single Indian war bordering on respectability. It can boast, however, a hundred or two of as brutal butcherings, on the part of our honest miners and brave pioneers, as any area of equal extent in our republic."
 - 6. San Francisco Bulletin, July 23, 1857.
 - 7. Ibid., March 13, June 1, and June 4, 1860.
 - 8. Ibid., June 1, 1860.
 - 9. Ibid., March 13, 30, 1860.
 - 10. Murdock, op. cit., p. 73.
 - 11. Ibid.
 - 12. Ibid., p. 74.
 - 13. George R. Stewart, Bret Harte Argonaut and Exile, pp. 61-83.
 - 14. Root, op. cit., p. 246.
 - 15. Ibid., 229.
 - 16. Murdock, op. cit., p. 76.
- 17. George R. Stewart made a study of his writing in A Bibliography of the Writings of Bret Harte in the Magazines and Newspapers of California 1857-1871, published by the University of California Press in 1933.
- 18. As early as October 1852, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in California recommended to the government the quartering of troops on the reservations for the protection of the Indians against lawless whites. General E. A. Hitchcock, commander of the Department of the Pacific, endorsed the plan as "perhaps the only one calculated to prevent the extermination of the Indians." See 33 Cong. spec. sess., serial no. 688, doc. 4, p. 377.
- 19. Owen C. Coy, in The Humboldt Bay Region 1850-1875, said that Gunther, the owner of the island, in his Autobiography, MS., repeated the report given by others, but later said that there were probably forty killed on the island. A. J. Bledsoe, in Indian Wars of the Northwest, used the files of The Humboldt Times, and he placed the total number killed at 250. Hittell, in California III, followed Bledsoe's account. In 1916 Lucy Thompson, a full-blooded Yurok of Pekwon, published in Eureka a little-known book called To the American Indian. In the book she mentioned that the massacre nearly exterminated the large tribe, and that in 1916 there were not more than twenty of the Wiyot Indians living. Llewellyn L. Loud, in Ethnogeography and Archaeology of the Wiyot Territory, used

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the files of the San Francisco *Bulletin*. He stated that "nobody ever knew with any exactness the precise number killed on the island," and he quoted Editor Whipple's report as written by Bret Harte.

- 20. The Northern Californian, February 29, 1860.
- 21. Mad River Bill was the son of "Old Mauweema," the leading Indian of the village north of Arcata on the bend of Mad River. He was honored with a burial in the Arcata cemetery when he died in 1918 at the age of seventy-six. The community endeavored to pay back the debts due him for what he had suffered.
 - 22. The Northern Californian, February 29, 1860.
- 23. Llewellyn L. Loud, Ethnogeography and Archaeology of the Wiyot Territory, p. 332.
 - 24. The Humboldt Times, March 3, 1860.
 - 25. Root, op. cit., p. 249.
 - 26. Murdock, op. cit., p. 77.
 - 27. Stewart, Bibliography of Writings of Bret Harte, p. 139.
 - 28. The Northern Californian, March 28, 1860.
 - 29. Franklin Walker, San Francisco's Literary Frontier, p. 259.