

Found: A piece of Captain See's Library

By Jerry Bowen

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A few days ago I received a telephone call from Maggie Halls. Maggie, who is one of the more active members of the Solano Historical Society and the primary force for a new Fairfield Museum and Archival Center, sounded excited.

"We've been offered a bookcase," she said, "for the new museum that once belonged to a historical Solano County sea captain!"

It didn't take long for Maggie, Don Hiemberger (Cement City Historian), and I to gather at the Rancho Solano home of Robert Flores.

The bookcase was tucked away in a corner of Robert's garage and although it looked like it had been there for some time, it was in fairly good shape. It appeared to have been part of a larger unit and the top molding was gone.

When we returned a few days later to pick it up, Mr. Flores provided a written statement that gave us a clue to the cabinet's original owner.

His statement, in part, is as follows:

"While traveling on Columbus Parkway near the old dumps at the Benicia/Vallejo city limits, I saw a sign that said "free firewood." I drove onto a dirt road, finding a work crew in the process of demolishing a house.

"I stopped and spoke to them and inquired what was going on. They told me they were building new homes in the hills behind them (Now the area around Rose Drive).

"They told me that the house belonged to an old sea captain. I saw an old barn in the distance and asked if I could go through it. They said sure.

"On the second floor of this barn was a large glass-door cabinet that looked old. They gave me permission to take the cabinet.

"I inquired further as to who had owned it. I was told a Captain 'C,' but I thought they were abbreviating the name at the time.

"My wife wanted me to make an entertainment center, but I didn't have the heart to cut

into the cabinet. It sat in my garage for the next 20 to 22 years.

"My wife then contacted the Historical Society who saved it."

The key clue was the name "Captain C." I remembered reading a couple of articles about a Captain See that had been stationed at Mare Island.

As it turned out, one of the articles had an excellent photo of Captain See in his library and it looked as though a portion of the bookcase in our possession was there.

His full name was Thomas Jefferson Jackson See. He was described as a big man, around 6 feet 5, with a massive frame, broad shoulders, direct piercing eyes and a voice of authority.

T. J. J. See was born in 1866 to Noah and Mary Ann Sailor See of Montgomery City, Mo. He and his five brothers were all named for famous men of the day. He was a man of many scientific accomplishments in addition to being a genius in the fields of mathematics, astronomy and philosophy as well as an authority on earthquakes, solar and lunar eclipses and many other natural phenomena.

He held a doctorate in astronomy from the University of Berlin and taught at the University of Chicago. Later he worked with renowned astronomer Percival Lowell in the discovery and mapping of double stars. In 1899 he joined the staff of the U.S. Naval Observatory, and later worked as an instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy.

In 1903 he was put in charge of the observatory and chronometer station at Mare Island, where he remained until his retirement in 1930.

Among his colleagues and friends he was well-known for his eccentric mannerism and his massive library. Marion Devlin, a former Women's Editor of the Vallejo Times-Herald, told a story that illustrates his eccentricity well.

"My first real encounter with him came one rainy morning when I was driving down Mann Street to the newspaper office after taking my sister to Vallejo High School where she taught. Standing at the corner of Mann and Ohio was Captain See, holding an umbrella that looked to me the size of a circus tent.

"I stopped my car and asked if he'd like a ride downtown. He climbed into the car and as I continued down the street he turned peremptorily: 'No, no, young lady I'm going to Mare Island.'

"I was shocked and all I could think about was what Orvin Gaston would think when his

one-woman staff failed to report for work on time. But I turned around and crossed the old causeway. At the gate, Captain See announced to the astonished sentry, 'This young lady is just driving me to the yard. We won't be long,' implying that the young man might have believed we were off on a morning frolic.

"He directed me to the quarters and as I murmured my relieved farewells he said: 'Just a minute, young lady I won't be long here. I'll be out shortly.'

"Thoroughly cowed by this time, I sat in the pouring rain and glowered. In about a half-hour he came out, and before I could head for the causeway he said brightly: 'Now turn left at the next corner and then wait for me; there's some mail for me at the post office.'

"It was another 15 minutes before he came out and climbed in, saying the magic words: 'Now young lady, you may take me home.'

"After I deposited him at his front door I wasted no time in getting to the Times-Herald office, and when I opened the door, well over an hour late, Orvin's face was far from welcoming.

"I began a quavering apology: 'I'm so sorry. I ran into Captain See' ... and he replied: 'Oh ... Well, that explains it. Okay.' "

After retirement, See and his wife moved from Mare Island to a home on Ohio Street in Vallejo. Captain See lived there until 1962, when he died at the age of 96.

A 1976 newspaper article about Captain and Mrs. See recalls: "Many tons of books had to be trucked from Mare Island when they moved his library from the island. He had corresponded with Einstein, among other equally famous scientists and had collaborated with them."

Whatever became of the vast scientific library and historic correspondence of this world famous scientist? The materials were not returned to Mare Island, nor were they sent to the National Archives, U.S. Naval Historical Center, or the Naval Observatory.

Perhaps some relative or descendant knows what happened to his extensive and valuable library. Meanwhile the remnant of his library bookcase is being held at the Vacaville Heritage Council until the museum at Fairfield becomes a reality. Who knows, perhaps someday his books and papers will also turn up and be reunited with the cabinet that once held one of Solano County's missing treasures.

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/164/>