Solano poet Edwin Markham: a man with a dream

By Nancy Dingler

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“Charlie” as his mother, a very dour and troubled woman, called her youngest, had been sent to dig soap root. Sometime around 1867-68, the burdened young man dug in the clay of the Suisun Valley.

As he stabbed at the hard soil, he struck something metallic. Charles Edwin Markham discovered a leather bag of gold pieces. From this discovery, Charlie would be able to attend the California College in Vacaville, something he had longed for and something that his mother had denied him for lack of money.

So distraught had Edwin been over his mother’s continued reluctance to allow him books and higher education, that he had run away from home. In later years, he would write and tell interviewers about that adventure as a 15 year old lad with a vague idea of maybe going to Oregon to see his brothers.

However, he met up with a highwayman who either, depending on which version Charlie used, either befriended or held him captive attempting to entice him into the world of robbers. Markham’s explanation for the bag of gold also varied. The gold was either buried and forgotten by a previous tenant, or perhaps his highwayman compatriot knew of his aspirations and left it there for him to find.

Those people who could see the “fire” of ambition within Charles encouraged his education. These included two of his teachers of the one-room school, William H. Hill and Samuel D. Woods, as well as the editor of the Solano Republican, which was published in Suisun. Charles was encouraged to come to the office to read magazines and newspapers.

Upon graduation from the California college, Charles received a certificate to teach. He started teaching for a meager wage, however, Markham hungered for more education. The State Normal School had moved from San Francisco to San Jose. Once again, his mother, Elizabeth, was reluctant to encourage or assist. Charles borrowed money from a cousin to enter the school at San Jose as a junior. At the end of two years, Charles had acquired a diploma and debts.

He went to work as a teacher in the remote community of Los Berros. When he was 22, Markham’s teaching career took an upturn, he was offered a position to teach at Coloma, El Dorado County. There, much to Elizabeth’s dismay, he met and married
Annie Cox. Unfortunately, the marriage soon soured.

Coinciding with teaching, was his burning desire to write prose. He had tried writing since the little one-room school house. His works began to be published under the name of Edwin Markham while at Vacaville’s college. His subjects of interest centered around his boyhood adventures, as well as a keen social interest in laborers, who he felt were exploited by the “spoilers.”

In 1886, a 34-year-old Markham saw a copy of a painting by world renown artist, Jean Millet, entitled; “The Man With The Hoe,” in Scribner’s Magazine. Millet’s painting completed in 1862, depicted the burdens of toil and worry in the face of a French peasant. The painting haunt Markham for years.

In 1899, the painting was on public exhibit and Markham was able to view it up close. “I stood before the painting, absorbing the majesty of its despair, the tremendous import of its admonition. I immediately jotted down a few of the opening lines of my poem . . . “

The poem consists of 49 lines and is named for the painting. Upon its publication, Markham became an intentional success. The poem earned over a quarter of a million dollars during the next 41 years.

Markham began a new career on the lecture circuit. He was in heavy demand everywhere, yet he never forgot the hills and valleys of his youth, writing several books about “his” California. Markham divorced and remarried an Anna Catherine Murphy, then moved with wife and family to New York in 1900. He continued to write and became very active in the social reform movements.

He became known intentionally as “The Dean of American Poetry.” Then on May 30, 1922, he was honored by being asked to read his poem, “Lincoln, The Man of the People” at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial.

Whether hardened by hard work as a boy on his mother’s ranch in Suisun, or family genes, Charles Edwin Markham lived 88 years, outliving both wives. He died March 4, 1940.