

Education put poet on the path

By Jerry Bowen

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This is the second of a two-part story about the poet Edwin Markham. Part 1 was published Sept. 2 - Editor.

After a failed attempt to join his father in Oregon, Edwin Markham returned to Vacaville to live with his mother. While she had promised that he could attend the California College, she did not help him in any way. Edwin again had to work on the farm.

Legend has it that one day, while digging, he stumbled on a box filled with gold pieces, supposedly left by a miner. Another version says that the highwayman Black Bart left him the money.

Whatever the source, this money, which Edwin concealed from his mother, enabled him to attend the California College in Vacaville for one year.

Around 1870, 18-year-old Markham left Vacaville to continue his studies in San Jose. His mother moved with him, continuing to make it difficult for him to go to school.

A cousin in San Jose had to lend him the money for his tuition and clothing. He finally graduated in 1872, receiving his teacher's certification.

He found a teaching position in San Luis Obispo County, where he taught for a couple of years. Then he decided to finish his own education at Christian College in Santa Rosa, a school sponsored by the Campbellite church.

During this time, Markham became well known as a mathematician and orator. One of his speeches, "The Aristocracy of Character," became the talk of the town.

In 1875, he married Annie Cox, and the couple relocated to Placerville, where Markham worked as a school administrator. He continued to write poetry. He also began studying the works of the mystic Thomas Lake Harris, whose esoteric ideas shaped much of Markham's intellectual and artistic development as well as his early published poetry.

Markham's first marriage failed in 1884. A second marriage to Caroline Bailey in 1887 ended when Markham's mother joined the household.

In 1898, he married his third wife, Anna Catherine Murphy, a well-known teacher with

progressive ideas in discipline and teaching methods. Their marriage lasted until her death in 1938. The couple had one son, Virgil.

Anna Markham later wrote in a letter to a friend that she had vowed to never marry a man with a beard nor a schoolteacher, and now she had done both.

Around that time, Markham was becoming widely known for his own teaching methods, eventually working as a superintendent of schools.

He also worked hard to establish himself as a poet. In 1880, his first poem "In Earth's Shadow" was published by the California Western Monthly. Several others followed, published mostly in the Eastern magazines.

He turned to contemporary literary figures such as Hamlin Garland and Ambrose Bierce for advice. Both were complimentary of his poetry, Garland encouraging him to emphasize the realistic, Bierce praising him for his idealism. Ultimately though, Markham turned to his mystic beliefs, his strong ties to nature and his interest in social reform as inspirations for his poetry.

In 1886, a friend gave Markham a copy of Scribner's Magazine containing an illustrated article with the painting "The Man with the Hoe" by French painter Jean Francois Millet. The painting deeply influenced him and he noted: "It held my soul, as one is held by some object of menace and terror. I could not get the picture of that degraded 'Hoe-Man' from my mind. It haunted me like some threat of eternal judgment.... I immediately jotted down in my notebook the first verse for the poem - and held fast to my purpose to write a poem that should cry the lost rights of the toiling multitude in the abyss of civilization ...

"I realized that I was looking on no mere man of the field: but was looking on a plundered peasant, typifying the millions left over as the debris from the thousand wars of masters and from their long industrial oppressions ... This Hoe-Man might be a stooped consumptive toiler in a New York sweat-shop..."

A few years later, in December 1898, Mrs. William Crocker bought the original painting and placed it on exhibition in San Francisco. Edwin Markham went to see it. Years later, in an interview with the Seattle Post-Intelligencer in honor of his 80th birthday, he recalled the impact it had on him:

"I was all excitement. I entered the building with great expectations. I sat before that Millet painting for a long hour, absorbing the majesty of its ruin. I went home ... filled with a great emotion and wrote the first verse of the Hoe Man.

"The next morning I woke up all aglow with the fervor of my purpose to finish the poem. Almost immediately the second stanza came flashing to me and through me. All day I could think of nothing else. I could write no more that day. I was like one in a trance. I mooned and crooned over the lines; held captive by what seemed to be some power above my own..."

On New Year's Eve, the Markhams were invited to a literary party where Edwin Markham read "The Man with the Hoe" for the first time. The poem was received with stunned silence.

One of the guests, Bailey Millard, editor of the Sunday San Francisco Examiner, exclaimed: "That poem will go down the ages!" and decided to publish it on Jan. 15, 1899.

The poem immediately was recognized and published in newspapers around the world. It was eventually translated into 40 different languages.

Now suddenly famous, Markham, "a Christian socialist," became an energetic public spokesman for the reaffirmation of personal integrity, human values and the unity of mankind.

One of his major focuses was the movement for the establishment of national child labor laws. Through his person, poetry, prose and oration, he passionately demanded social conscience and promoted social justice.

He became one of the major poets of the time, much beloved and honored. On his 80th birthday, he was honored by President Herbert Hoover at a party at Carnegie Hall, naming him one of the most important artists of his age. He died on March 7, 1940, and is buried next to his wife Anna in Los Angeles. The grave's inscription reads: "Let us live the poetry we sing."

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