

Volunteer Newsletter - Summer 2016

***The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* Mystery Solved!**

The historians among RLA's volunteers will recognize the name Hubert Howe Bancroft, the entrepreneurial San Francisco bookstore owner, publisher, and historian whose personal reference collection on America and western civilization formed the founding collection of UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library. Beginning in 1882, Bancroft began publishing an exhaustive, multi-volume history on the civilizations, natural history, and cultures of Central America, Mexico and the American West. Bancroft employed a small army of researchers and writers, but did much of the work himself. The resulting 39-volume *Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* (1882-1890) was sold throughout the West by skillful promotion—some 6,000 sets worth over a million dollars. The book sets were promoted and sold by subscription. One signed up to receive the books and they were sent to customers as they were published – similarly to the Time-Life books some of us might be more familiar with today.

Some of RLA's docents and bibliophiles may be aware of the set of *The Works* that graces the shelves of the Library in the Ranch House, and how RLA came to acquire the set of leather-bound books. Back in 2007, Rancho Los Alamitos received a very unexpected and generous gift from a former vice president of the Bixby Ranch Company, Stewart Honeyman. Mr. Honeyman and his family are art collectors and connoisseurs. While at an auction for art and rare books, Mr. Honeyman spied a set of *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* and on the spine of the books was the name "John W. Bixby." Mr. Honeyman knew what he was looking at, so he successfully bid on the books and donated the set to Rancho Los Alamitos. The books are proudly displayed on the shelves of the Library in the historic Ranch House.

The Bancroft books that Mr. Honeyman donated to RLA are all the more interesting and valuable because they belonged to John W. Bixby. Unfortunately, while Mr. Honeyman's gift consisted of a nearly complete set of *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* (volume 34 is missing), it was not John W. Bixby's *complete* set. Twenty-six of the books donated have John W. Bixby's name emblazoned on the spine in gold letters. But twelve of the books bear another person's name or no name at all, and one volume is missing altogether. It appears as though a collector had come across John Bixby's partial set and filled in the missing volumes with volumes from other sets in order to create a complete – or nearly complete set. And this is what Mr. Honeyman discovered at the auction and donated to Rancho Los Alamitos. But where are John Bixby's thirteen missing books?

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Volumes from John W. Bixby's set of *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* can be seen in this circa 1890 photograph of Susan Bixby's parlour (now the Billiard Room). The books are visible on the 2nd shelf from the bottom of the bookcase on the right. (RLA# 68.1.9882)

Fast forward nine years, when the curator was compiling a list of the missing Bancroft volumes for a rare book dealer who offered to search for them on behalf of RLA. In assembling the list of the missing volumes, the curator noticed for the first time that *all* the "missing" volumes were about California history. The volumes in RLA's collection with John's name on the spine were histories of other western states or Mexico. The curator knew that it was likely Fred H. Bixby's sister, Susanna Bixby Bryant, inherited the complete set of Bancroft's *Works*, along with the contents of the ranch house, from her mother's estate in 1906. What if Susanna chose to retain *only* the books on California history and sold the rest? The curator knew that Susanna had assembled an impressive reference collection of her own on a wide variety of California topics, including California history, and that Susanna's personal library had ended up at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont. In fact, in 2010, 213 volumes from Susanna's personal library at RSABG were transferred to RLA as a loan. RSABG believed Susanna's books on California history would be put to better use at an historic site than at the botanical garden. Could the thirteen missing volumes from John's set of *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* be on the shelves of the reference library at Rancho Santa Ana? In June, the question was put to RSABG's librarian. The librarian was puzzled that RLA's curator not only knew that RSABG possessed an incomplete set of *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* with John W. Bixby's name on the spines, but that she knew precisely which volumes RSABG possessed! Mystery solved: Between the two Bixby family sites, Rancho Los Alamitos and Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, John W. Bixby's complete set of *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* can be accounted for. We think John would be pleased to know it all "stayed in the family."