

San Diego's Humorist: George Horatio Derby

We found ourselves in a large bar and billiard-room . . . Here I saw Lieutenant Derby, of the Topographical Engineers, an elderly gentlemen of emaciated appearance and serious cast of features. Constant study and unremitting attention to his laborious duties have reduced him almost to a skeleton . . . He was sent out from Washington some months since, "to dam the San Diego River," and he informed me, with a deep sigh and melancholy smile, he had done it (mentally) several times since his arrival.

--from *Phoenixiana* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1855)

The narrator of the passage above was the lieutenant, himself. Young (and quite unemaciated, in fact) George Horatio Derby was an Army engineer, tasked with redirecting the channel of the San Diego River. The hapless engineering project would be fodder for humor, from a man Mark Twain would call "the first great modern humorist."



Derby in his West Point uniform.

Born in Massachusetts in 1823, Derby was West Point graduate and veteran of the U.S.-Mexico War. He came west in 1849 as an officer for the Department of the Pacific. In the next four years he would excel in survey and engineering projects in the Sacramento Valley and on the Colorado River.

In leisure hours he contributed witty anecdotes to the San Francisco *Herald* under his West Point nickname "Squibob." When the popular bits of satire attracted a rival using the same pen name in a competing newspaper, Derby "killed off" Squibob in humorous obituary, and adopted a new pseudonym: "John Phoenix."

Derby came to San Diego in January 1853. He found the town "pleasantly situated" on the banks of the San Diego River, with "perhaps, a hundred houses, some of wood, but mostly of the 'Adoban' or 'Gresan' order of architecture."

San Diego had a population of about 700 at the time, "two-thirds of whom are 'native and to the manner born,'" Derby observed. "The rest were a mixture of American, English, German, Hebrew, and Pike County." In "Sandyago—A Soliquy," Derby would pen: "The natives are all sorts comected; Some white, some black, & some kinder speckled."

Like many new arrivals in San Diego, the lieutenant's observations included comment on the town's notorious fleas. Derby's "feelings of indignation against those wretched insects," would result in his famed "Antidote for Fleas":

Boil a quart of tar until it becomes quite thin. Remove the clothing, and before the tar becomes perfectly cool, with a broad flat brush, apply a thin, smooth coating to the entire surface of the body and limbs. While the tar remains soft the flea becomes entangled in its tenacious folds, and is rendered perfectly harmless.

Vermin notwithstanding, Derby saw promise in the young town. The possibility of a transcontinental railroad terminating in San Diego “was within the range of probability,” he decided. “The landholders about here are well aware of this fact, and consequently affix already incredible prices to very unprepossessing pieces of land.” For himself, Derby claimed, “At present I should prefer the money to the real estate.”

Derby’s Army assignment in San Diego was to redirect the San Diego River from the harbor—where it had been dumping silt into San Diego Bay—into False Bay (today’s Mission Bay). To protect the value of the harbor to shipping, the Army wanted to restore the river’s “proper” outlet to the sea.

Beyond the engineering challenge, the task was frustrated by poor funding. But the job did afford Derby lots of free time while he waited for money and direction from Washington.

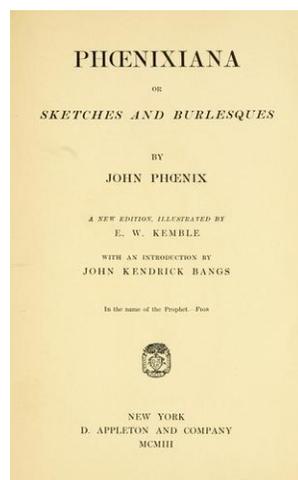
Articles from “John Phoenix” began to appear in San Diego’s newspaper, *The Herald*, published by Derby’s good friend, John Judson Ames. When Ames prepared to leave for San Francisco on a lengthy business trip in the summer of 1853, he informed his readership: “A friend of acknowledged ability and literary acquiresments will occupy the ‘old arm chair’ during our absence.”

Derby produced six remarkable issues of the *Herald*, enlivening the columns with witty commentary and satire. His last issue--entitled *The Illustrated San Diego Herald*--featured comical woodcuts of current events. For a time, he changed the political stance of the *Herald* from Democrat to Whig, and nearly pushed the Whig candidate for governor, William Waldo, to victory.



When the return of Ames was imminent, Derby printed the story of his “battle” with the offended editor: “We held [Ames] down over the press by our nose (which we had inserted between his teeth for that purpose) and while our hair was employed in holding one of his hands, we held the other in our left and ... shouted to him, “Say Waldo!””

Actually, Ames took the prank in stride, commenting only, “Phoenix has played the ‘devil’ during our absence, but he has done it in such a good humored manner, that we have not a word to say.”



The editor encouraged his friend to publish his writings in a book. Derby was uninterested but eventually allowed Ames to sell the collection in New York City to D. Appleton and Company for \$450. Ames apparently pocketed the money and Derby never profited from the success of *Phoenixiana, Or, Sketches and Burlesques*, by “John Phoenix,” which would be reprinted at least twenty times by 1890.

Derby left San Diego in 1855. (The unfinished “Derby Dike” on the San Diego River would wash away two years later. A permanent levee was not completed until 1876.) A difficult road building job in Oregon and

Washington followed, where Derby observed “it rains incessantly twenty-six hours a day for seventeen months of the year.”

Poor health plagued him the late 1850s. Under a doctor’s care in New York City in August 1860, Derby complained in a letter to a friend in San Francisco about his prescribed meals: “Now you may imagine I lose flesh on this [diet] weighing 142 lbs. I am pleased with this result as I shall shortly exhibit myself at Barnum’s Museum as the Living Skeleton and make a handsome fortune as Barnum as promised me \$30.00 a week when I get down to 30 lbs in weight. It won’t be long.”

George Derby would pass away eleven months later, at the age of 38, leaving a wife and three children. His collection of stories in *Phoenixiana* still stands as a classic of American humor.

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