

# J. A. Shepherd of San Diego

*A "diary" new and spotless from my loud-hearted friend Bowers. He shall be remembered for this.*

--diary entry of J. A. Shepherd, January 1, 1872

Eyewitness accounts of early San Diego are a treasure. The 1872 diary of J. A. Shepherd, the quiet bookkeeper of city founder Alonzo E. Horton, provides a fascinating first-hand look at "poor, isolated San Diego," as the young town struggled to find success in its obscure corner of the United States.

The diarist Shepherd was an immigrant from England. Born in Wiltshire in 1827, Jesse Aland Shepherd came to America with his father at age 15. He spent the next six years as a printer's apprentice, working on *The Cayuga Chief* in Auburn, New York. When the newspaper moved to Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin in 1856, Shepherd moved with it as office foreman.

Shepherd would briefly run his own newspaper, the *Fort Atkinson Standard*. But ill-health dogged the young printer and in 1870, "owing to failing health," he decided to move to San Diego. Before the move it is likely that Shepherd was acquainted with another Fort Atkinson resident, George W. Marston, who also came to San Diego in 1870. Shepherd already knew San Diego's Alonzo Horton, a first cousin of his wife, Fidelia Kinney.

In San Diego, Shepherd began a second career as the business manager of Horton. For a salary of \$100 month, he would competently run Horton's commercial affairs for the next seven years—the founder's most successful period as a businessman.



Jesse Aland Shepherd (1827-1877)

At Christmas time in 1871, Horton's brother-in-law, W. W. Bowers, presented Shepherd with a leather-bound diary. In the following year, Shepherd would faithfully chronicle his daily activities, along with observations on San Diego politics, local business, the weather, and the San Diego dream of a railroad connection to the East.

Apart from his salaried position with Horton, Shepherd worked as an insurance agent and as a notary public. He also dabbled in real estate, sometimes in frustrating competition with Horton himself: "Lively trade at Horton prices, which are ruinous to my prospects as a seller of real estate. I can't compete with the 'proprietor' when he sells 11 lots for the price of seven!"

Shepherd returned to newspaper publishing in February when he joined Horton, George Marston, E. W. Morse and several other businessmen, to take over the weekly *San Diego Bulletin* and

publish it daily. “The decision is made and the Bulletin office is to become the property of the San Diego Publishing Association,” Shepherd wrote on February 9, then adding a day later, “shall think I am a printer again if I have to talk newspaper much more.”

Originally appearing in 1869, the *Bulletin* competed with the *San Diego Union*. The *Union* dismissed the new daily as a political organ of the liberal Republican Party and wrote the editor “possesses a graceful pen,” [however] “the paper produces but little news.” Shepherd noted in his diary, “This morning’s *Union* comes out pugilistic, and even yesterday bared its teeth for several little snarls.”

Work on the *Bulletin* was time-consuming but rewarding for Shepherd:

*I hardly get time to think between printing, book-keeping and outside calls. Had nearly forgotten I was a Notary Public. Printing mysteries are not so easily forgotten and I could enjoy a little hard work in the business of converting the Bulletin office from the errors of its former owner’s ways.*

The *Bulletin* venture failed after only a few months and become the *San Diego World* under new owners. Shepherd noted its passing in July: “last words will be recorded tomorrow morning and the *Union* will probably say with old crow—‘I told you so.’”

Waiting for the railroad is a recurring theme in Shepherd’s diary. A San Diego rail link to the outside world was critical to the town’s future. Shepherd was pessimistic about the prospects, writing on March 9, “There is exceeding fear in San Diego that the railroad promises are about to be dried up by Congress,” then, musing later in the month, “railroad expectations seem vanishing in the distance like a dream, when morning wakes us to realities.”

But Shepherd seemed confident on November 11 when rail construction finally seemed underway:

*Pleasure and business have been on friendly terms today. San Diego has been railroading in the direction of San Bernardino. The ground was “broken” and the day looked brightly upon a large crowd of well-wishers to the enterprise. Beer and champagne made some merry, but nobody drunk.*

The optimism was premature. San Diego would not get its railroad until 1885. Shepherd would revert to pessimism when he later wrote:

*There is a mist over our hopes which all the stirring fails to dispel. San Diego is bound with cords to a railroad corpse when her people were expecting to be borne onward by the power of a living creature of enterprise, money and iron nerves reaching out to the Atlantic.*

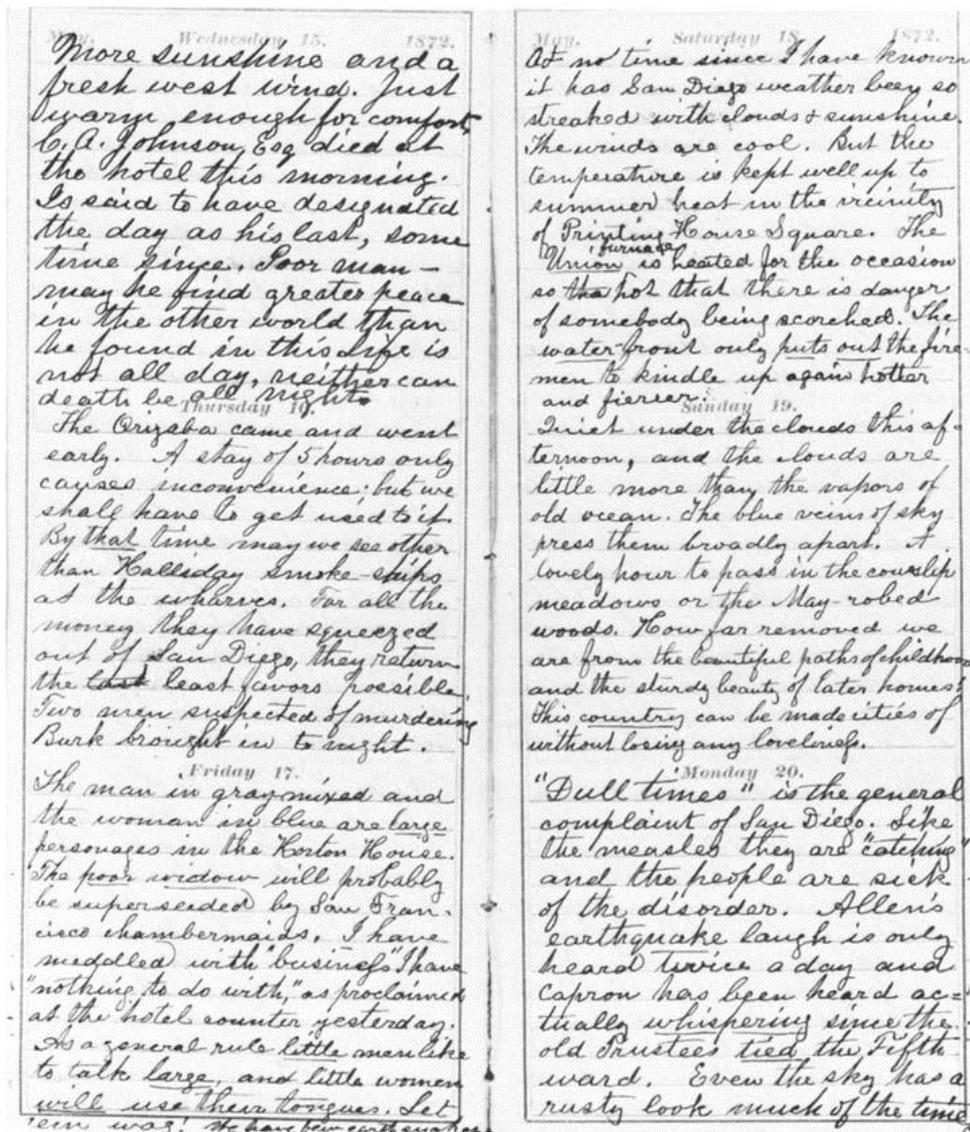
Shepherd’s favorite complaint was San Diego’s weather. “These days are a dry joke upon the wet season,” Shepherd wrote in January. “The atmosphere is transparency itself. The wind comes from the direction of the Rocky Mountains, and though warmed by its journey, doesn’t sweat a bit.”

An avid gardener, Shepherd would complain in April, “the garden is failing with signs of dry weather . . . Potatoes and the like are given over to early death. California is dry, dryer, driest.”

The lack of rain created billows of dust in the streets of San Diego, which Shepherd noted with disgust:

*I wish the wind would postpone the sweeping of D Street [Broadway] until it rains, for Sandpaper is hard writing material . . . Dust and Flies! San Diego is flying in all directions. Tries one's patience and piety to write on Sandpaper and whip flies off the end of your nose at the same time.*

J. A. Shepherd's career as a diarist concluded at the end of 1872. His journal, preserved today by the San Diego Historical Society, was apparently not continued in later years. Never robust, Shepherd would succumb to pneumonia at age 50, in 1877. "A more unselfish man never lived, declared the *Union*. "In his quiet, unostentatious way, he was one of the cornerstones of our young city."



Originally published as "Bookkeeper's diary gives early look at city," by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union Tribune*, July 19, 2008. p. CZ.2