



The Silverado Squatters

Robert Louis Stevenson

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The Silverado Squatters (1883) is Robert Louis Stevenson's travel memoir of his two-month honeymoon trip with Fanny Vandegrift (and her son Lloyd Osbourne) to Napa Valley, California, in 1880. In July 1879, Stevenson received word that his future American wife's divorce was almost complete, but that she was seriously ill. He left Scotland right away and travelled to meet her in Monterey, California, (his trip detailed in *The Amateur Emigrant* (1894) and *Across the Plains* (1892)). Broken financially, suffering from a lifelong fibrinous bronchitis condition, and with his writing career at a dead end, he was nursed back to health by his doctor, his nurse, and his future wife, while living briefly in Monterey, San Francisco, and Oakland. His father having provided money to help, on May 19, 1880, he married the San Francisco native, whom he had first met in France in 1875, soon after the events of *An Inland Voyage*. Still too weak to undertake the journey back to Scotland, friends suggested Calistoga, in the upper Napa Valley, with its healthy mountain air. They first went to the Hot Springs Hotel in Calistoga, but unable to afford the 10 dollars a week, they spent an unconventional honeymoon in an abandoned three-story bunkhouse at a derelict mining camp called "Silverado" on the shoulder of Mount Saint Helena in the Mayacamas Mountains. There they managed to "squat" for two months during a pleasant California summer, putting up makeshift cloth windows and hauling water in by hand from a nearby stream while dodging rattlesnakes and the occasional fog banks so detrimental to Stevenson's health. The Silverado Squatters provides some interesting views of California during the late 19th century. Stevenson uses the first telephone of his life. He meets a number of wine growers in Napa Valley, an enterprise he deemed "experimental", with growers sometimes even mislabelling the bottles as originating from Spain in order to sell their product to sceptical Americans. He visits the oldest wine grower in the valley, Jacob Schram, who had been experimenting for 18 years at his Schramsberg Winery, and had recently expanded the wine cellar in his backyard. Stevenson also visits a petrified forest owned by an old Swedish ex-sailor who had stumbled upon it while clearing farmland—the precise nature of the petrified forest remained for everyone a source of curiosity. Stevenson also details his encounters with a local Jewish merchant, whom he compares to a character in a Charles Dickens novel (probably Fagin from *Oliver Twist*), and portrays as happy-go-lucky but always scheming to earn a dollar. Like Dickens in *American Notes* (1842), Stevenson found the American habit of spitting on the floor hard to get used to. His experiences at Silverado were recorded in a journal he called "Silverado Sketches", parts of which he incorporated into Silverado Squatters in 1883 while living in Bournemouth, England (font Wikipedia).

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