



NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This was Nevada Series

Phillip I. Earl

Dan DeQuille – The Traveling Stones of Pahranaगत

Continuing our series on Nevada's literary history presented as a part of the Society's current exhibit on publishing history, we take up the story of Dan DeQuille, the venerable scribe of the Territorial Enterprise, and his tale of the Traveling Stones of Pahranaगत.

The original story appeared in the Enterprise on October 26, 1867, as a filler when homicide took a holiday, no new strikes were reported from the mines and the stock market was static. The scene was remote Pahranaगत Valley in southern Nevada.

According to DeQuille, a prospector had found a large number of heavy stones which possessed some rather peculiar characteristics. When scattered about on a floor or level surface, they immediately began moving toward a common center and would huddle together like a covey of quail. A single stone removed to a distance of a yard would return to the others, but, if carried out four or five feet, would remain motionless.

The prospector said that the floor of the valley was pitted with a great number of small basins, each filled with the stones. According to those who had examined them, DeQuille wrote, the stones were of an iron composition lodestone, or magnetic iron ore.

Once in print, the story spread to the entire civilized world and DeQuille was soon inundated with hundreds of inquiries. Since he had already established a credibility and a veracity as a regular contributor to three of the country's most highly respected mining journals, Mining Scientific Press, Mining Industry Tradesman and American Mining Journal, those who read the story of the wondrous stones assumed that DeQuille was making an accurate report.

The response to the story was also a reflection of popular beliefs in the miracles of the scientific age, whether they be in the area of natural lore or the vastly expanding field of technology. Many readers were thus open to suggestion regarding new scientific wonders, but, in the case of the traveling stones, were unable to distinguish between an actual scientific phenomenon and the fictitious mutterings of a bored writer.

Among those taken in by the story was a group of German scientists dabbling in the study of electro-magnetic currents. The letter to DeQuille from the secretary of the group was addressed to "Herr Dan DeQuille, the eminent physicist of Virginia City, Nevada." They wanted more information and samples of the stones, but DeQuille's denial of the existence of the rocks availed him nothing, indeed, it only laid him open to a charge of unprofessional conduct for his attempt to keep his "brother scientists" in ignorance of truths concerning the laws of nature.

The operator of a circus informed the Comstock newsman that there was money to be made from the stones. Writing from Massachusetts, he asked the hapless journalist to send him a carload. He planned to exhibit and sell them, he wrote, and offered to divide the profits. This offer amused DeQuille to no end, but he often expressed a dismay at not being able to come up with a plan to make money out of the fictitious rocks.

As the years passed and the letters continued to come in, DeQuille became disgusted with the whole thing. To some writers, he suggested that they contact "Mark Twain, who probably has still on hand fifteen or twenty bushels of various sizes." To others, he pleaded that the story of the traveling stones was just that, a story, but denials availed him nothing.

On November 11, 1879, he finally told the whole story in the columns of the Enterprise. Confessing to having made it up in an idle moment, he pleaded for an end to the inquiries. "We have stood this thing for about fifteen years, and it is becoming a little monotonous," he wrote. "We are now growing old and we want peace. We desire to throw up the sponge and acknowledge the corn; therefore, we solemnly affirm that we never saw or heard of any such diabolical cobbles as the traveling stones of Pahrnagat, though we still think there ought to be something of the kind somewhere in the world.

If this candid confession shall carry a pang to the heart of any true believer, we shall be glad of it, as the true believers have panged it to us, left and right, quite long enough." DeQuille's disclaimer never got the circulation of the original story, however, and he continued to be bothered by letters, offers of money and requests to conduct expeditions into the wilds of the Pahrnagat country to bring out some of the strange stones. His explanation, word for word, was published again twelve years later, July 11, 1891, not long before *he* laid down his pen, hung up his eye shade and retired to West Branch, Iowa. Dan DeQuille finally left this vale of tears 1898, thus freeing himself at last from the literary folly of his years on Nevada's Comstock Lode.

Nevada Historical Society

1650 North Virginia Street Reno, NV. 89503

775.688.1190 www.nvhistoricalsociety.org