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On the Gold Rush's track

by Michael Negele

(Mechanics' Institute, San Francisco, CA)



Andy in front of the entrance 57 Post Street

I was able to take advantage of a business trip to Berkeley, CA in July 2004 to visit my friend Andy Ansel and to go with him by BART (Bay Area Regional Train) to the Mechanics' Institute, 57 Post Street in San Francisco downtown. John Donaldson was expecting us, he is the director of the Chess Room there, the oldest chess club of the United States which was probably founded even in 1854 along with the whole institution.



In John Donaldson's office, 4th floor



Reading room of the Mechanics' Institute's Library (above and below)

The Mechanics' Institute should offer education and cultural entertainment to the mechanics who had settled after the gold fever (in 1848 gold was discovered at Coloma in the North East, also San Francisco benefited from that). Nowadays its magnificent library with about 160,000 books in the neoclassicist reading rooms is a gem. Among them is quite a considerable number of nice chess books and magazines – so John showed us a marvellous edition of the Wiener Schachzeitung or of the Deutsches Wochenschach and of the British Chess Magazine located in a special room for the valuables as well as common books intended for lending.



Andy and John in front of the valuable chess books of the Mechanics' Institute

John also showed Andy and me all the duplicates from numerous gifts packed in stockrooms in the basement – a real treasure trove.

Finally we went to the historic playing room with its old chess tables – surely the captured pieces should slip into the felt lined compartments.



In the Chess Room, 4th floor



The master and his attentive follower

Particularly instructive for me was a short "chess lesson" John Donaldson taught me with one of his recently played games, before we went – passing the Mechanics' Monument – to an absolutely delicious dinner.



Mechanics' Monument



At dinner

A very successful expedition as the final photo shows.



The additional scans of documents I got from John Donaldson give a deeper impression of the significance of this imposing institution.

On "Chess in San Francisco" and also on the Mechanics' Institute's Chess Room reports Edmund Lomer in his article in *Schachkalender 1997*, Edition Marco, pages 112-115 (in German only, see below).

(We thank Arno Nickel for his permission to present this article here.)

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THE MECHANICS' INSTITUTE is a nonprofit membership organization open to the public. Founded in 1854, the Institute's goals were to provide technical education and training for mechanics, to sponsor lectures for members and the public on technical and cultural topics, and to promote local industry.

From 1857 to 1899, the Mechanics' Institute sponsored thirty-one industrial fairs, exhibits of agricultural products, manufactured goods, scientific apparatus, and art. The fairs, while providing great entertainment for nineteenth-century San Franciscans, also promoted the entrepreneurial spirit of early Californians and the evolution of California from the gold rush economy through the age of industry and agriculture.

Mechanics' Institute history is interwoven with the history of the West. James Lick, Andrew Hallidie, Thomas O. Larkin, and William C. Ralston, to name a few, were supporters of the early efforts of the Institute. Mark Twain wrote contemporaneous accounts of the industrial fairs, Horace Greeley lectured at the Institute, and Presidents Harrison, McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt were welcomed to the Institute during their visits to San Francisco.

Today, the Mechanics' Institute serves the people of San Francisco and the Bay Area with a full service, general interest library, a historic chessroom, classes, lectures, and literary and performing arts events that support the educational, vocational, and cultural interests of the entire community. Housed in its landmark building on Post Street, the Institute strives to balance its unique history with the demands and promise of the future.

Chess Room, 1910



Third Mechanics' Pavilion - 1864, Union Square



Circulation Desk, 1898



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