

“My, Oh, My, The Feeling Run  
High Here In The War Days”

# CALIFORNIA'S VOLCANO BLUES

By Sandra Hansen

“**W**e are far away from the scene of trouble, so that there is little hope of our having anything to do with the war, but our hearts and best wishes are with our friends.”

When John Doble wrote these reassuring words to his friend Lizzie Lucus in 1861, he was not being entirely truthful. The California mining town of Volcano probably did seem worlds away from the guns of Fort Sumter. But Doble did not deign to mention that he had recently become a member of Volcano's first Union militia—a militia that had been formed to protect the town and its citizens from a Confederate uprising.

In 1861 Volcano was noted more for its saloons and dance halls than its politics. It was the most populous town in the “Mother Lode,” and had been ever since gold was discovered there by Mexican War members of the 8th New York Regiment of Volunteers in 1847.

The soldiers had named the town “Volcano” because the crags and rocks around it gave it the look of a volcanic crater; and in the early days, these crags and rocks were rich in gold. Although much of it had been depleted by the time Doble penned his letter, the mineral was still plentiful enough—a factor that had both North and South eyeing Volcano and its neighbors with interest. “The vast mineral resources of California,” reported Confederate Lieutenant Colonel John R. Baylor, “in addition to its according an outlet to the Pacific . . . makes its acquisition a matter of some importance to our government.”

However, the Mother Lode, like the rest of California, remained predominantly pro-Union. In fact, many of its prospectors were almost comically patriotic, as newspaperman Tallman Rolfe reported on July 22, 1862: “Mr. Varney declared he would not have his hair cut until the stars and stripes again wave . . . his features have become so



Latter-day Californians dressed in “Volcano Blues” uniforms and pose

obscured . . . that we have heard some uncomplimentary remarks from his lady friends.”

“I had the pleasure of hearing it stated that I was a Secessionist,” wrote English journalist Andrew Williams. “And that statement was coupled with some wholesome advice as to what a Secessionist need expect if he lifted his little finger [in the area].”

**H**owever, there was a rising anti-Union sentiment in Amador County (which included Volcano and its close neighbor, Jackson). Many of its citizens were transplanted Southerners who did not



with the town cannon, "Old Abe." The photograph was taken at a parade in the 1930s.

believe the Mother Lode had received sufficient attention from the Federal Government.

"Why should we trust to the management of others," wrote Milton S. Lantham, politician (and former Southerner), "what we should abundantly be able to do for ourselves?"

In the early months of the war, the towns of Volcano and Jackson were the scenes of several lively skirmishes.

"My, oh, my, the feeling run high here in the war days!" recalled miner G. Ezra Dane.

"My employer is a Tennesian [*sic*] and a disunion sympathiser [*sic*]," John Doble wrote to

Lizzie Lucas. "I was, and am, an unconditional Unionist, and this gave rise to frequent disputes which endangered ill feeling. As soon as this was shown, I left."

The situation was not eased by other Rebel sympathizers, like Lovelick Hall, who wrote such scathing "disunion" editorials in his *Amador Dispatch* that he was imprisoned in Fort Alcatraz for his "treasonable conduct."

It was, in fact, rumored that members of the secret "Copperhead" organization, The Knights of the Golden Circle, had begun to infiltrate Volcano, Jackson, and other mining towns. This



The Bancroft Library, University of California

Diarist John Doble, chronicler of California's Civil War times.

greatly concerned Unitarian minister and ardent unionist, Thomas Starr King who journeyed from San Francisco to the Mother Lode in 1861. During a meeting at Volcano's Lutheran church, he told the crowd that Jefferson Davis was the "devil incarnate," and his cause a "pollution and horror."

"It is not only an unjustifiable revolution," he cried, "but a geographical wrong, a moral wrong, a war against the constitution, against the New Testament, and against God." His rhetoric impressed so many of the town's citizens that the gold pan he had nailed to a tree for contributions was soon filled to overflowing.

**B**ut the pro-Southern element was not totally quelled. "Starr King made a tour of the southern mines," sneered an editorial in the pro-Southern *Sonora Union Democrat*. "And this clerical charlatan, hypocrite, and double-distilled humbug is still repeating his threadbare lecture on patriotism."

Even the normally stoic Doble was admitting to Lizzie Lucas: "The secesh here have scared us several times a little."

Doble was not the only citizen who was worried. One of them, James M. Porter, decided the time had come to take some definite action. On July 13, 1861, he organized a meeting at Mahoney Hall for all able-bodied men who would be willing

to "undertake the task of assisting civic authorities in maintaining the law and order among these people . . . but also suppressing any display by Secessionists in Amador County."

Porter had no trouble in recruiting sixty-seven volunteers for the fledgling unit. It was decided that the militia be called the Volcano Blues, and Benjamin Ross was appointed the unit's first captain.

Porter was understandably pleased with his efforts, especially since permission to organize the Blues had to be obtained from Judge Marion W. Gordon, a Southerner. Nevertheless, he voiced concern to Quartermaster Adjutant General William Kibbee over the lack of "precedence," and confessed to feeling himself "somewhat in the dark."

His fears were well founded.

The Federal Government was somewhat loath to issue precious rifles to such an unorthodox company. Despite Porter's pleadings, the Blues were initially armed with "old pattern" muskets. Furthermore, there appeared to be little for the Blues to do during that fall of 1861 except practice marching in formation. A good deal of overt secessionist talk had been subdued by their very appearance. By winter, many members of the outfit were notably less enthusiastic. In fact, they were beginning to feel downright restless. And in early 1862 an astonished Doble was writing: "[Most of] our company . . . is now gone to Oregon, to supply the place of the regular soldiers who have been drawn to go East."

**A** large percentage of the Volcano Blues, including Captain Ross, had indeed enlisted in Company D of the 4th Brigade of the California Volunteers, and were on their way to Fort Vancouver, Washington Territory.

Porter was as dumbfounded as Doble. His proud militia had suddenly been reduced to an "unattached" company. Moreover, he was convinced that the Confederate element was as strong as ever, a sentiment which was shared by Doble: "Should the war continue for a year or two longer," he wrote, "we will have some fighting in this state."

Porter was certain that Volcano and its gold could not be defended by a handful of musket-bearing soldiers. He sent pleading letters to Sacramento, where he found an unexpected champion in Judge Gordon.

"The company appears to be governed by the true military spirit," he wrote to Adjutant General Kibbee. "They have informed me that they have a safe, fireproof place for [an] armory. And I believe the arms will be cared for."

The company received its rifles and some new recruits in 1863, perhaps on the strength of Porter's letters, but more likely due to the activities of the Knights of the Golden Circle in San Francisco. The secret organization had reputedly plotted to capture the *Jim Chapman*, one of several vessels that were transporting gold to Union ports. The scheme was discovered, and the leaders captured. But the likelihood of another such attack worried certain citizens of Volcano.

Even Adjutant Kibbee was asking the Blues' new captain, James Adams: "Have you a safe armory, or would it be more safe to distribute arms among members of your company?"

Volcano did have a safe armory, and by the fall of 1863 it was considered even safer. It had been clandestinely reinforced by the addition of a 737-pound bronze cannon named "Old Abe." No one is quite sure just how Old Abe came to California. Legend had it that the cannon, which had been forged in South Boston in 1837, had been shipped west for use by one of Zachary Taylor's regiments during the Mexican War.

The cannon barrel lay abandoned on a San Francisco wharfside for many years, until it was discovered and transported to the Mother Lode. But some theorized that it was spotted by John Doble himself, who had moved to San Francisco (somewhat conveniently) in 1863.

Although it was understandably against regulations to arm militia units with heavy artillery, an interesting note survived from Adjutant Kibbee to Captain Ross which indicated that he may not have been unaware of this wharfside discovery: "You and the detail from your company will be passed upon stage and steamboat to San Francisco and return."

It seemed likely that a contingent of Blues did travel to San Francisco to retrieve the cannon. Unfortunately, at this point the partnership of Old Abe and the Volcano Blues became partially cloaked in mystery.

Rumor had it that the cannon barrel was transported to Sacramento by riverboat, and then to Volcano by a hearse driven by the town undertaker. From there, it was spirited into Captain Adams' blacksmith shop, where it was covertly fitted with a new carriage.

Townpeople are fond of saying that the threatened uprising did occur—and that "Old Abe" was wheeled onto Main Street to face a crowd of armed Confederate sympathizers, with their collective eyes on the armory and Volcano's gold. It is said that on a prearranged signal, all pro-Union merchants opened their windows, saving them while the windows of all Confederate

shops were shattered by Old Abe's mighty blast. The secessionists are said to have dispersed.

It is a wonderful story, but, alas, an undocumented one. However, there is proof that there was considerable life in Old Abe after its arrival in Volcano. Although its blasts were considerably less dramatic, it could be said that the cannon was instrumental, if not in quelling Confederate uprisings, then in reinforcing pro-Union sympathies and giving life to the faltering ranks of the Volcano Blues.

"Old Abe belched forth the thunder from a dozen kegs of powder," reported the *Union Ledger* after a Republican rally in 1864. It added that the Sutter Brass Band "swelled and gave cadence to the sulphurous [*sic*] echoes."

However, this display was nothing compared with the scene following the fall of Richmond: "The cannon was constantly engaged until 2:00, firing in all some 300 guns," reported the *Ledger*. "This was arduous duty, and as it commenced to pall upon the gunmen . . . the ladies . . . came forward [*sic*] and tendered their shankers and aprons for wadding—they themselves applied the match to the cannon."

The war was over. The Union was saved. Old Abe and the Blues had triumphed over the Confederate element in Volcano.

Or had they?

In the summer of 1865, a mysterious fire broke out in Volcano. Most of the buildings on Main Street, including the armory, were burned. "The flag was flying when the building took fire," Volcano historian J.D. Mason wrote, "[and yet] the old flag refused to burn or to fall—and waved in triumph until the tall flag staff burned off . . . when it fell beyond the fire and was saved by the boys, who made a rush for it."

"The boys" also managed to save most of the contents of the armory, including the cannon, which was not even singed.

Unharmful Old Abe remained as an emblem and a mascot for the Blues until the unit disbanded in 1868. For them it had been a symbol of courage, tenacity, and perhaps, the Western penchant for drama. "[It] spoke in loyal tones of thunder," reported the *Ledger*, "causing the mountains to reverberate with the union music issuing from its brass lungs."

"Although we [did] not see and feel the calamity here so strong or plainly . . .," John Doble wrote from San Francisco, "thousands here [were] ready to go at the call . . . and fight for that beloved flag which has so long waved triumphantly over us."

Those patriotic ranks also included a bronze cannon, rescued from ignoble abandonment to become one of the unsung heroes of the Civil War.