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## Press Release

### Historical journal reports secrets behind infamous "Drake's Plate" hoax



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By Kathleen Maclay, Media Relations | 18 February 2003

**BERKELEY** – Researchers who spent a decade digging into one of California's most infamous hoaxes now say they know who did it and have a pretty good idea why.

At a press conference today (Tuesday, Feb. 18) at the University of California, Berkeley, the researchers revealed what may be the final chapter in the story of a brass marker dubbed "Drake's Plate." The plate was discovered in 1936 and purportedly recorded the California coastal landing in 1579 of English explorer Francis Drake and his ship, The Golden Hind.



This brass plate, engraved with what purported to be Francis Drake's 1579 claim to *Nova Albion*, became California's greatest historic treasure when it was found and authenticated in the 1930s. It turned into the state's greatest hoax when it was retested forty years later. (Courtesy Bancroft Library)

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It passed muster at the time of its discovery and was proudly acquired by the campus's Bancroft Library. However, scientific testing 40 years later determined it to be a fake.

Among the newest findings was that the hoax:

- Was created by a group of respected Bay Area men active in history and the art world
- Was an elaborate joke that got terribly out of hand
- Was successful despite indirect warnings that the plate was a fake

Researchers Edward Von der Porten, a nautical historian, archaeologist and retired maritime museum director; Raymond Aker, a maritime researcher who died earlier this year; Robert W. Allen, a historical researcher and educator; and James M. Spitze, an amateur historian, have published these findings and more in the latest issue of *California History*, a California Historical Society publication.

Their conclusions may surprise many Golden State history buffs who accepted the long-circulating story that the playful E Clampus Vitus historical fraternity, also known as the Clampers, was responsible for the prank. The group has bristled at the accusation.

While acknowledging they lack a "smoking gun," lead author Von der Porten and his fellow researchers cite a wide range of sources that they say point the finger at a band of well-established and respected gentlemen of the day - only one of whom was known to have been a Clamper.

The cast includes:

- G. Ezra Dane, a prominent member of the Clampers and of the California Historical Society. He instigated the hoax.
- George Haviland Barron, curator of California history at the de Young Museum in San Francisco until 1933 and a leading member of the California Historical Society. He designed the fake plate.
- George C. Clark, an inventor, art critic, appraiser and friend of Barron's, who engraved the plate.
- Lorenz Noll, an art dealer and restorer, and Western artifact dealer Albert Dressler. They are believed to have helped with the fluorescent lettering "ECV" applied to the back of the plate.
- Herbert E. Bolton, who was director of The Bancroft Library from 1920-1940 and Sather Professor of American History. He also was, like Dane, a member of the California Historical Society and the Clampers. Fascinated by stories about Drake posting a brass plate to mark his entry into California, Bolton was known for telling his students to be on the lookout for it when in Marin County. The plate's appearance fulfilled Bolton's dream, and he was thrilled to acquire it for The Bancroft.



Herbert E. Bolton, director of The Bancroft Library from 1920-1940. (Courtesy Bancroft Library)

Sport brought these men together, although Bolton was unaware of the game.

"Spoofing its own members was an accepted part of Clamper fun, and the distinguished Professor Bolton was a tempting target," the researchers said.

But the organization's leaders did not sanction the joke, so Dane sought assistance from Barron, Clark, Noll and Dressler, the writers said.

Barron designed the plate, borrowing most of the text from "The World Encompassed by Sir Francis Drake," a detailed account of Drake's voyage that was first published in 1628, with reprints available in the early 1930s.

Barron's friend and neighbor, Clark, reportedly designed the layout for the plate and chiseled the lettering.

The plate was fashioned from common brass, with text carved with a chisel and the letters' raised edges hammered down. Then, the plate was heated over a wood fire to create a dark patina. It was hammered once more, darkened more with dirt, ash and possibly more chemicals, and possibly subjected to fire once again and buried for a time.

Then one of the conspirators - the authors believe it was probably Dane in cahoots with Noll and Dressler - labeled the plate a Clamper prank by painting "ECV" on the back with fluorescent paint. All the handiwork paid off, even more than they had planned, the researchers write: "...the realization that Bolton was almost unquestioningly supporting the plate's authenticity must soon have changed jubilation to shock, and - quickly - deep concern. Their inside joke, intended to be resolved with a good laugh over a dinner table or at a Clamper meeting, had escaped from their control."

It was of major significance that Bolton was not the only one conned. Among others also taken in was Alan Chickering, a lawyer and president of the California Historical Society and other society officers and members who donated \$3,500 to buy the plate for the library. The historical society's directors, who authorized publications about the plate, also were fooled.

The tricksters and most of the hoaxed all belonged to the same small world of California history enthusiasts, the researchers said, making a public confession very difficult. Though the tricksters tried to warn Bolton indirectly, he disregarded the warnings.

About a decade after the plate was found, Lorenz Noll told Albert Shumate, a San Francisco doctor, California historian and longtime leader of the California Historical Society and the Clampers, what really happened. He said that Barron, Dressler, himself and others were involved in what Shumate characterized as an elaborate joke that got terribly out of hand.

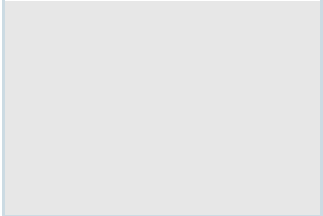
After Dane, Barron and Clark died in the early 1940s, and Bolton in 1953, Noll began opening up with his story to a somewhat wider circle, the researchers say. When Noll confided to the editor of *The Pony Express*, the editor convinced him to dictate a statement, which was typed and signed by him in May 1954. He identified Clark and Barron as the plate's creators, and Noll just listened.

Officials at The Bancroft Library called the new California History article very persuasive.

This research "may well be the final chapter in this great mystery," said Stephen Becker, director of the California Historical Society. He commended the researchers "for their excellent scholarship, for setting the story straight, and helping us all enjoy this wonderful tale of historical fact and fiction."

The phony plate became a centerpiece of the 1939-1940 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island, and photographs of it appeared in textbooks and popular magazines. The discovery location on San Francisco Bay also set off 50 years of fierce debate about where along California's coast Drake really landed.

For all the confusion and misinformation surrounding the plate, the California History article authors said the hoax has had positive impacts



that include increased public awareness of the state's explorer-era history and a wide range of related research.

The fake plate will remain on display at The Bancroft Library, but the real thing, researchers say, may still lie deep beneath the water, rocks and sand of Drake's Bay.

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