

A Readers Theater: Who Was Thomas Starr King?

Readers: Up to 6 Interviewers; Thomas Starr King

Question 1.

Mr. King, after arriving in California, you were befriended by Col. John Frémont, California's first Senator, and his wife Jessie -- two people at the top of San Francisco's "A List of Society and Political Elite." Could you tell us how that evening went?

Response 1.

When Mrs. Frémont asked me, "What does a newly-arrived Bostonian like yourself think of life on the Pacific shore?" I told her,

I may be newly-arrived, but not so new that I can't find good strawberries, and a plentiful supply of free sand and fleas. Don't suppose that I don't feel at home, though, for San Francisco has her time with wretched weather, just like Boston.

Then I posed a question to Mrs. Frémont: Before our friendship progresses farther, let me ask; do you think it sacrilegious for a man constitutionally hilarious to become a minister? Jessie laughed and allowed that she never heard that humor disqualified one from that profession.

Since humor was acceptable, I shared another concern: I do feel, however, that my size tells against me here in a land of big trees, big waterfalls, and big vegetables.... since I am a mere five feet tall, I have a secret weapon -- though I weigh only 120 pounds, when I'm mad, I weigh a ton!"

Question 2.

Although California entered the Union as a free state in 1849, almost all positions of public power are held by men of the South who still deeply resent being outmaneuvered by the anti-slavery faction at the state constitutional convention. Today in 1860, California is a white man's land, where the Chinese and black people are despised by some powerful political factions and their constituents.

As a result, the state legislature passed a law in 1850 which made Negro testimony illegal in civil and criminal court cases. – consequently, blacks are unable to obtain legal redress for crimes committed against them, unless a white man was witness to the crime and is also willing to testify in court on their behalf.

And the many Chinese who have come to California to work and make a life for themselves are not faring any better. Could you share your thoughts on the issue of race relations?

Response 2.

If there is a race within our borders for which there is no organization of liberty, but upon whom the architecture of the Saxon institutions frowns like the sullen masonry of forts and jails; to whom their security is the security of the dungeon; and for whom the strength of law is the strength of bolts and chains -- how plain is the call upon those of our people whose hands can help them, to consider their case in the light and by the methods of a practical and sinewy freedom! ...

Wherever we find many races brought together, there God had his greatest work to do – there is room for the noblest work of Christianity... The Almighty has a great mission for this nation – here the Church is to proclaim the equality of the races. Wherever the oppressed are congregated, there Christ is present – and not on the side of power! ... It is always easier for a person to look with reverence to those who are above, but it greater to revere the man who is below.

Question 3.

Not long after you arrived in San Francisco, you began accepting invitations to speak at various civic events. The purpose of many of these events is to raise money for the sponsoring organizations. For example, one of your first engagements was on the Fourth of July's annual "Children's Celebration" sponsored by the Episcopal Mission Sunday School.

But the Episcopal Mission's Standing Committee voted unanimously to disapprove the action taken by the Sunday School in selecting a Unitarian minister as the keynote speaker. The standing Committee has even gone so far as to publish their resolution in the *Daily Alta California*. Your policy of "keeping denominational fences low" seems to be creating a stir. Would you please comment on this situation?

Response 3.

It has been brought to my attention a different newspaper published their own disagreement. *The Sacramento Daily Union* wrote,

Several of the newspapers are denouncing the action of the Episcopal Standing Committee as a piece of gross uncharitableness and want of Christian courtesy, partaking of an old and exploded system of sectarian bigotry and intolerance. We concur...

As for my remarks at the charitable event, I began with these words and sentiment:

The Fourth of July is the time to assemble not as croakers or critics, but as grateful children of the past; not as partisans, but as patriots; not with gloomy foreboding, but with psalms of thanksgiving for historic mercies, leading us to the sentiment of trust... Today we will look at our privileges and gifts...

If there is intolerance anywhere today we will be the more glad that our empire was founded on the wisest religious liberty.

Question 3 (Follow-up)

Even though your speech was about the ideals embodied in the U.S. constitution, the Standing Committee has not relented in its criticism of you. Will you respond, and if so what will you say?

Response 3 (Follow-up)

As a Unitarian and Universalist, I have rejected the aspect of ordinary orthodoxy which tells men, unless they live according to a certain scheme of thought and service in this life, a doom of misery will be executed upon them in the life to come, from which God will not allow them any escape or return. They appeal "come to Christ; Find the Savior; Delay is dangerous, for death may overtake you tomorrow" – these are the characteristic warnings of the movement, this shows its radical vice. Its working force. ... is not the glory of truth... The long arm of its lever is selfish fear..... I cannot do anything else than say this is poison.

A large number of men and women, no doubt, reject most of this venom. But the majority take it into their own constitution. It becomes their wisdom, their motive, their measure of God's character...

This is a ghastly philosophy of life, with its artificial terrors, its theories of the government of the moral world, so discordant with the simplicity of science, so foreign from the clearest insight which our best literature reveals...

Question 4:

The United States is facing a civil war and the majority of the men holding positions of political power in California have roots which trace back to various southern states and are known as the Chivalry Democrats. Would you please share your views about the threatened secession of the southern states and the possibility of an armed response from the Union and how this will affect California?

Response 4:

In my short time here, it has become clear the Southerners out here are down on me because, they say, I am a strong anti-slavery man. They refuse to patronize my lectures on that ground and have said that I must not be countenanced. Result: crammed houses. How powerful the Southerners must be!

Another telling fact was when the California votes for president were tallied: Lincoln won California's four electoral votes!

But we are seeing rumblings of discontent in South becoming sharper and more insistent.

Within a week of election of Abraham Lincoln, some hard-driving slave-state men are doing everything in their power to see the slave states should leave the Union without waiting for any overt act against them from the antislavery administration in Washington.

It is fair to say, the driving force behind all the frenzied succession activity is the crucial fact the 'peculiar institution,' even in the deepest South, is a desperately fragile structure that could collapse when facing only the mildest breeze.

The mere existence of a national administration hostile to slavery – even on that was pledged to leave it untouched where it already existed – spells doom for the institution. Even though such doom might be successfully resisted for many years, nevertheless the inevitable result will be the same: for, once the bane of public opinion and national condemnation are permitted to waft in the

Southern air, it will eventually strike the white man who owned no slaves (easily the majority) that what was good for the slaveholder might not necessarily be good for him also.

Question 5:

In December 1860, S. Carolina seceded and state officials issued a “ Declaration of the Immediate Causes” which claims the northern states have denied the rights of property established in fifteen of the states and recognized by the Constitution; the northern states have denounced as sinful the institution of Slavery and they have permitted the open establishment among them of societies whose avowed object is to disturb the peace and to steal away the property of the citizens of the ...(Southern) States.

California’s Congressman Charles Scott wrote a letter to the Chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee and stated: “If this Union is divided and two separate confederacies reformed, I will strenuously advocate the secession of California and the establishment of a separate republic on the Pacific Slope.” Please share your views on the possibility of an independent California.

Response 5:

If Virginia also is allowed to secede, then Mount Vernon would become a part of the Southern Confederacy, a situation that can never be allowed. The dust of Washington must belong to the nation which holds Trenton, Princeton, Monmouth, and Valley Forge.

What?! His bones lie quiet in a republic founded on secession which he hated and trampled down? Devoted to the idol worship of slavery which he desired to abolish? Inaugurated by desecration of the flag which he would have poured out all of his blood to sustain? ... Would he sleep or would he not rise in a burst of his terrible wrath, from a cemetery over which the Stars and Stripes would be accounted pollution by his degenerate descendants!

Question 6:

Mr. King, as you have been advocating for California to remain in support of the Constitution and the efforts of the Northern States to win the war against the secessionists, you deemed it important to reach out to the mining camps in the state’s interior. Could you describe your experience of giving speeches to the miners?

Response 6:

The main theme I used in my speeches delivered to the mining camps was patriotism and, looking back, not only was this an adventure of a life-time, its success was revealed at the voting booth.

Since most of the mining camps lacked any facility to accommodate a public speaker and a church would only occasionally be available, many times the speaker's platform was nothing more than a hay bale in front of a stable or even the steps of a saloon.

With such primitive facilities, I was forced to speak extemporaneously – a feat which I had wanted to master from some time.

I knew full well that roughly half of those listeners who showed up would be Southern sympathizers, so I knew that to have worn a gun in this situation would have been an open invitation to be killed.

Even though I have become accustomed to receiving anonymous letters hinting at assassination and pledging open threats of personal violence, the first experience of standing before a crowd of crusty, hard-bitten, rough-hewn miners left me with an indelible impression: “ I never knew the exhilaration of public speaking until I faced a front row of revolvers and bowie knives!”

I did take the precaution of only speaking in places where I had received an invitation, so those who invited me provided personal protection.

By the time I had delivered successful speeches at many camps along the route, the antagonists tried another tactic in order to embarrass me: they resorted to an old mining camp ruse where someone would suddenly level an unloaded pistol and then snap the hammer with the intention of making me flinch, thereby arousing laughter over the fear of an unloaded piece.

The risk with this ploy was that if the victim didn't duck, the 'joke' was then on the perpetrator. It may be supposed that staring down the barrel of an unloaded pistol without flinching is no great feat; but looking into the black depths of a barrel in the mining camps.... where murder is an everyday affair... without even raising an eyebrow required courage so certain that even burnished steel was like putty by comparison.

To these distractors chagrin, I never flinched, so the last recourse open to those who wanted to be rid of me was to shoot when I was unprotected. Fortunately, my supporters in the camps happily saw to it that this never occurred!

Question 6 (follow up)

You said your theme in speaking to the miners was patriotism, could you speak to that please?

Response 6 (follow up)

Peace, industry and cultured freedom are the warp of our country's mission and there can be no patriotism on these shores that does not acknowledge them... Anything lower than this form of patriotism here ... is a disgrace to ourselves... if a county such as ours is to raise no loftier, no more heroic type of national virtue than that, our fertile zone will indeed be barren of attractive fruit. Then we may say, here is America, but where are the Americans?

... We are living for the future. It doth not yet appear what we shall be... True patriotism, therefore, which labors to keep a nation faithful to its mission, cannot be satisfied here unless the ideas of human worth and privilege that awakened and supported our political struggle, ripen and produce their finest spiritual fruit.

Source: Thomas Starr King by Robert Monzingo