

LA MEUSE, THE “MAYFLOWER” OF FRENCH ARGONAUTS TO CALIFORNIA

In February 1848, a revolution overthrew King Louis Philippe’s monarchy and gave birth to France’s Second Republic. This uprising marked the beginning of a long period of disorders,



riots, and economic disturbances which resulted in the forced idleness of over 100,000 men in Paris alone. Rioting occurred at different times and culminated in the general uprising of June 1848. Barricades were thrown up in several parts of the city and bloody battles were fought between extremist republicans and the

moderate government’s troops.

The country was wallowing in political chaos and enduring an economic standstill, when around Christmas time, the news that fabulous gold deposits had just been discovered in California reached France and ignited the imagination of the people. As a would-be gold digger related, “*Revolutionary fever turned into gold fever.*” Emigration to California suddenly appeared to many as a god-sent solution for their difficulties.

CALIFORNIE.

San-Francisco DIRECTEMENT. — Le beau navire **MEUSE**, capitaine HAUVEL, sortant de carène, doublé en cuivre à neuf, cloué et chevillé en cuivre, du port de 500 tonneaux, prendra fret et passagers de chambre et d'entrepont, et partira pour cette destination incessamment.

Note. — Un Médecin et un Chimiste sont attachés à ce navire pour soigner les passagers.

S'adresser :
Au Havre, à MM. JOS. LEMAITRE et Co.
A Paris, chez M. C. COMBIE, rue Notre-Dame des Victoires, 44.

Barely three weeks after that surprising piece of news, on January 11, 1849, a Parisian newspaper announced the outfitting of a ship bound directly for San Francisco: *La Meuse*, a thirteen-year old, three-masted whaler named for a French river.

At least eight separate announcements between that date and March 15, 1849, reported the progress and delays in the ship’s preparations. When at last, on March 23rd, *La Meuse* set sail from the French harbor of Le Havre, it became the very first of a long stream of French vessels bound for California’s golden shores between 1848 and 1855. The “Mayflower” of French Argonauts to California, so to speak...

Who were California's "Argonauts"?

Where does the term "Forty-Niner" come from?

Why was the time of a ship's arrival important when it came to finding gold?

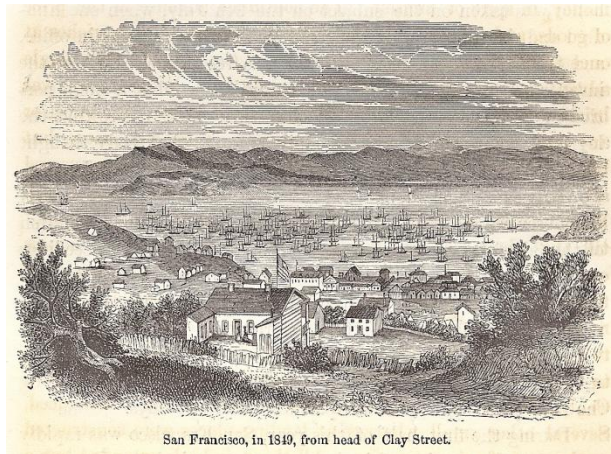
The ship's 41 passengers were the first Frenchmen to dare this risky venture, the first to head around the awe-inspiring Cape Horn to seek gold in a land no one knew much about. As such, they were dubbed "Argonauts" in reference to the legend of Jason and the Golden Fleece. The two youngest were in their teens, the three oldest in their 50s, and the rest were evenly spread between their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Besides six independently wealthy men, there was among them a lawyer, an engineer, two pharmacists and five businessmen. These were the bourgeois. There were also a dozen store-keepers and about 10 artisans, a coachman, four store clerks and three laborers. As for their crew of 19, most natives of Normandy and Brittany, their average age was about six years younger than that of the passengers: younger men could better handle the physical challenges of a crossing around the Horn.

La Meuse encountered beautiful weather along its entire route except around Cape Horn where she ran into horrific storms and lost one seaman, Louis Constant Métras. However, when they stopped at Callao, below Lima, Peru, to provision, they heard confirmation of California's gold mines, and the tedious voyage, the hardships of crossing the Horn all but vanished.

The captain picked up eight new passengers in Callao. It is therefore with the symbolic number of 49 passengers—men who reached California in 1849 were known as "Forty-Niners"—that she finally sailed into San Francisco Bay on September 14, 1849, at six in the morning. She was the first ship to bring would-be gold-diggers to San Francisco direct from France. *La Meuse* anchored in the bay among the 128 ships that had arrived in September alone—a total of 782 for all of 1849. San Francisco's main newspaper, the *Alta California* reported the harbor master's entry in his log: ***Sept. 14 – Manse—ship—French – Havre—173 days at sea*** and added an interesting detail: French businessmen Hugues, Pioche & Co. were entrusted as commission merchants to handle the ship's cargo. Since there were no warehouses, the sales were handled from the ship by such commission merchants. A French connection was clearly in place already in San Francisco since both Aimée Hugues and F.A. Pioche hailed from *la Belle France*.

In a country where the lowliest servant earned 330 francs a month, it was impossible to keep aboard seamen for only 600 francs a year. As a result, between September 18 and October 5, 1849, ten of the crewmen vanished ashore. The officers alone remained united, and paid welcome visits to the subsequent French ships that in turn reached California's shores.

Two of *La Meuse* passengers left important accounts of their California adventures. The youngest aboard, Jules Antoine Auradou, 16 years old, told many tales of his long life in



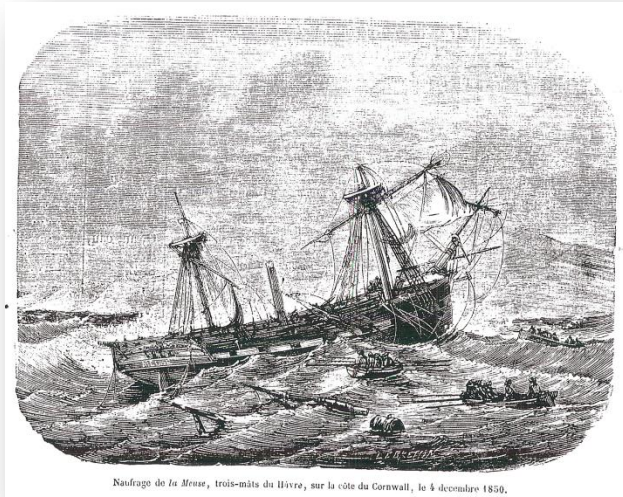
California. 33-year old Aimée Eudes, a commercial broker, sent home a long letter composed in San Francisco on February 25, 1850.

When young Jules and his father Jean disembarked on the beach of Yerba Buena Cove –which is now the city's business district—they landed near a stranded vessel, probably the *Niantic*, and stopped at a French restaurant called *Les Trois Amis*, at the foot of Broadway Street. Aimée Eudes also mentioned this restaurant as he landed. He wrote his long letter about the topsy-turvy world of Gold Rush San Francisco from that place where he still resided in February 1850. This reinforces the sense of a significant French connection in San Francisco even at that early date. Numerous Frenchmen living in countries around the Pacific had, like Pioche & Hugues, reached San Francisco with the earlier waves of 1849 gold seekers.

Both the Auradous and Eudes immediately headed for the goldfields since it was still early in the fall season. These were lucky days for gold-diggers. Eudes netted nine ounces of gold before returning to San Francisco on December 4. Jules Auradou found a single nugget that weighed 22 ounces. Their long and daring trip had been well worth the trouble.

Meanwhile, Captain Hauvet made preparations to head back to France, an unusual and difficult feat in those early gold rush days when sailors could name their wages. While legend has it that he sailed to Hawaii with only four seamen aboard, his ship's roll reports that he hired ten sailors from other ships. Although he intended to leave right after Christmas, Captain Hauvet

actually managed to set sail from San Francisco only on January 1st, 1850, taking both freight and passengers with him to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), then Manila, Singapore and Calcutta.



Naufrage de la Meuse, trois-mâts de Livree, sur la côte de Cornwall, le 4 décembre 1850.

When at last, after 114 days at sea, *La Meuse* approached the Atlantic, a frightful storm had already shipwrecked many French vessels, all within a week. Captain Hauvet steered into the gales, but fog and heavy seas prevented him from finding his route and currents drove *La Meuse* onto the rocky shores of England. Only one passenger lost his life, crew and passengers were safely taken to France by steamer.

Captain Hauvet stayed with the rescuers as long as he could to salvage his cargo, but his health suffered and he too was sent back home.

The tens of thousands of Frenchmen who landed on San Francisco's shores in the heydays of the gold rush, introduced themselves to others not by mentioning their native towns or of their original professions, but by naming the ship that had brought them over.

Those who like Jules Auradou and Aimée Eudes reached California in 1849 were regarded a bit as royalty: they were the legendary "*Forty-Niners*," the only pioneers who were admitted into the prestigious Society of California Pioneers. The modest little whaler *La Meuse* deserves to become a part of California's legend as well.

For more on French ships to California:

- French Maritime Archives
- *Journal du Havre*
- Olivier Ledour's « *Les Bretons dans la Ruée vers l'Or de Californie.* » Les Portes du Large, 2006.
- Dr. Chalmers dissertation: "L'Aventure Française à San Francisco pendant la Ruée vers l'Or, 1848-1854."

Documents also used in this tale :

- Historian Jacques Perilhou's research and collection
- *Ship passenger list la Meuse*
- *L'Illustration* of December 20-27, 1850
- Interview of Jules Auradou at the Society of California Pioneers
- Letter from Aimée Eudes published in *Le Mineur*, February 25, 1850.

The illustrations were drawn from Mr. Perilhou's & C. Chalmers' collection.

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