

Review Articles

Henry Stevens of Vermont, American Rare Book Dealer in London, 1845-1886.

By Wyman W. Parker. Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1963. 348p., ports. \$7.50.

Henry Stevens of Vermont (1819-1886) was born of "poor but respectable parents," in Victorian phrase, and rose in true Horatio Alger fashion to become one of the world's leading book dealers. Penmanship started him on the road to success. Copying historical documents was an early profitable task which partially supported him at Middlebury and later at Yale from which he graduated in 1843.

In 1840, when he paused in his college pursuits to make a little money as a government clerk, he met Colonel Peter Force, from whom he "received a vision of the importance of the early records of American history." His support of Colonel Force in his attempt to secure funds from Congress cut short his stay in Washington but established him firmly in the Colonel's affections. Later Force helped Stevens out of financial difficulties by allowing him to copy manuscripts for his Americana collection. However, Stevens' borrowing against future copying to pay college bills and to buy rare books led him into trouble with Force as it did later with other customers. Parker notes, "such was ever his trouble, for he loved books and bought liberally, only afterwards making desperate efforts to get funds to hold the books until he could garner bibliographical data and sell the books to advantage" (p. 34).

After Yale came the Harvard law school, but Stevens learned more about the rare book business than he did about the law during his eighteen months in Boston. He was fortunate in his contacts and began serving as an agent for John Carter Brown and other Americana enthusiasts. Here began his reputation for high prices, with his old mentor, Colonel Force, the first to complain. Yet he kept his customers, for he had a "native ingenuity about acquiring valuable books and manuscripts, a veritable genius in nosing out important material" (p. 43).

His mild success in Boston led to a desire

to visit the London book markets. Borrowing \$400 from Jared Sparks, Stevens left Boston in 1845 with definite commissions from several Americans and a plan for copying colonial records in British archives. Although he had little cash, fortune smiled upon him when he discovered the newly acquired Ternaux collection in Obadiah Rich's shop. Reserving £650 of the best Americana for his customers, Stevens quickly turned a 30 per cent profit and established himself as a London dealer in American books.

In the years that followed, Stevens became famous for his buying and selling of Americana, English Bibles, and other rarities. His chief customers were John Carter Brown and James Lenox, but he also became the agent for the British Museum for American books and the Smithsonian agent for English books. A man with ambitious bibliographic schemes, he was one of those individuals whose procrastination never permitted him to enjoy the rewards of patient scholarship. Rather, "He was a tradesman who loved to deal in books and with people who worked with them" (p. 189).

A bankruptcy in the middle sixties slowed his pace, but did not keep him from the notable accomplishment of selling George Brinley a Gutenberg in 1873.

For those who have read Henry Stevens' *Recollections of James Lenox* (New York Public Library, 1951), this biography will be a disappointment. While Parker has presented a thorough and readable account of Stevens' relationship with his clients and has particularly emphasized his bibliographic efforts, the personality of Stevens is not well developed. The biography of a man who has been described as one of the most colorful book dealers of the nineteenth century should have warranted a more lively presentation.

The biography is best when covering the years from 1845 to Stevens' bankruptcy, and the chronological list of the publications of Henry Stevens will also be useful for students of the history of nineteenth century bibliography. The last chapter, however,

"The Library Association, 1878-1886," seems more an appendage than an integral part of the biography and one feels that the work as a whole lacks unity.—*Edward G. Holley, University of Houston.*

Pioneer Printer, Samuel Bangs in Mexico and Texas. By Lota M. Spell. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963. 229p. \$5. (63-11190).

The life of Samuel Bangs reads somewhat as a picaresque novel. He was already a journeyman printer when he departed his native Boston as a young boy in 1816 to join the military forces of General Francisco Xavier de Mina seeking the independence of Mexico from Spanish rule. As printer to the expedition, but drawing the pay of a captain of artillery, Bangs printed on the island that is now Galveston and in Soto La Marina before the small army suffered total defeat and he was imprisoned in Monterrey. Later released, he was made to print for the Spanish government there and, upon the successful attainment of independence in 1821, for the Mexican authorities both there and in Saltillo. He was, of course, the first printer to work in any of these locations.

Permitted to leave Mexico in 1823, he visited his home and family, was married, and printed for a time for the Methodist Book Concern before deciding to return to the Latin world in 1826. He was appointed official printer to the Mexican state of Nuevo León, but he did not work at it, taking instead a similar assignment for the state of Tamaulipas and later for the state of Coahuila and Texas. At this time he also developed a sizable business for the importation of presses, types, and other printing equipment from the United States.

In 1830 Bangs was granted a vast tract of land in what is now Texas—more than a quarter million acres—for his services to the Mexican Revolution, but he was fleeced out of it by a fast-talking attorney. In 1837 his wife died of yellow fever and a disheartened Bangs returned to the United States. By mid-1838, however, he was remarried and back in Texas, this time publishing a

newspaper in Galveston. Successively thereafter he printed in Houston, Corpus Christi, and Matamoros, and was proprietor of a press in Point Isabel, but life was hard on Bangs. The misfortunes of war, the vagaries of Texas politics, the uncertainties of land speculation in troubled times, all militated against him. Although his several newspapers were of recognized high quality, they uniformly failed. On one occasion Bangs was even thrown upon the device of keeping a hotel in order to furnish livelihood for his family.

Finally, in 1849, with nothing to show for more than a half century of hard work, Bangs made a hard decision. Leaving his family behind until he could find permanent work, he went to Kentucky where he printed for a time in Louisville and later in Georgetown. Before he could earn passage money to bring his wife east, however, Samuel Bangs contracted typhoid fever and died on May 31, 1854. He was buried in Georgetown, far from his family and from the great Southwest that had been his home for more than thirty years.

Lota M. Spell, long a student of the history of the region, has spent much of her life doing research on the activities of Samuel Bangs, publishing her first article about him in 1931. She has now put together more than three decades of work into a brief but comprehensive and very readable biography of the man. Setting his life well into its important historical perspective, Mrs. Spell has written a good account of Bangs' travels and adventures which bespeaks clearly his influential role as a pioneer bringer of letters to a sizable segment of the nineteenth-century frontier in two cultural settings.

Full documentation and extensive bibliographical apparatus make *Pioneer Printer* well-nigh definitive as a study of Bangs' life and of early printing in northeastern provinces of Mexico and in south Texas. Impeccable scholarship is clearly evident, and the book is recommended highly to all libraries and individuals having interest in the subject, the region, or just plain good reading.—*D.K.*