

American Indian Studies – Ayer Collection – Ayer, Edward E. How I Bought My First Book



Photograph of Edward E. Ayer in the California Redwoods. 1910. NL Archives 2 15 02.

***The Newberry Library Bulletin*, December 1950**

By Edward E. Ayer

[Editor's Note: This touching story, known wherever there are Americana collectors or their books, but never before published, was written by Mr. Ayer upon the flyleaves of the first of his three most precious volumes. His copy of Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* is a Philadelphia edition of 1864, far from a first and worth today, without the binding, considerably less than he paid, but it still occupies the place of honor in the famous collection which he assembled and, with a substantial endowment, presented in 1911 to the Newberry. Julius B. Cobb and Daniel Pritchard's Book Store, listed in the Chicago Directory of 1864 as being at 83 Lake Street, does not of course appear in any of the histories of Chicago. Yet everyone who knows and has used the collection which they helped to start will, like Mr. Ayer, bless them both. Without them he might never, as he admits, have found out what fun reading history could be.]

I was born in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the 16th of November, 1841. My schooling was in the cobblestone schoolhouse of Bigfoot Prairie and a little later in the first school at Harvard, Illinois. At this time books were very scarce, of course, and I virtually never saw any but the Bible and Josephus' works. In 1860, at the age of 19, I started across the plains and four months later landed in Silver City, Nevada and worked there in a quartz mill until I got money enough to go over the mountains to San Francisco. I worked in the quartz mill 12 hours a day. At this time Nevada was the roughest place on earth and I was certainly glad to get out of it.

I arrived in Frisco with 25 cents and went to visit some dear friends, Mr. Wesley Diggins and family [The Diggins family came from McHenry County, Illinois]. The next morning I started out to find a job—of course I wanted an easy one. I found it sawing wood with a bucksaw in a wood yard. I graduated from this to a planing mill some four months later and worked there until the 15th of August, 1861, when I enlisted in Company E, First California Cavalry Volunteers. [Sergeant Ayer re-enlisted as a veteran volunteer at Santa Fe on October 5, 1863, and was discharged there on February 26, 1864, to accept promotion as 2nd Lieutenant, First New Mexican Volunteers.] We were sent to Lower California in October and stayed there until April, 1862, when we went south over the Colorado desert into Arizona and on to Tucson. I was sent from Tucson south 60 miles to the Cerro Colorado mine [This famous mine, 10 miles north of Arivaca, produced nearly two million dollars worth of high grade silver ore before attacks by Apaches compelled its abandonment], in charge of 14 men to guard the mine. Here I found a small library furnished by the owners [Colonel Samuel Colt, whose civilizing exploits were not wholly confined to making revolvers, was the donor of “the small library” at the mine] the first one I had ever seen, and in it I discovered Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico*. I suppose being only eight miles from the Mexican border influenced me in selecting it to read. I read it through twice and was astonished to find that history could be so interesting.

We finally went on east into New Mexico, and about June 1, 1864 I started for home. Of course, I had seen no other books. I arrived July 1 at Harvard, Illinois, my home, and my father [Elbridge Gerry Ayer, founder and first president of the village of Harvard] presented me a third interest in a country store of which he owned two-thirds in Harvard. About August 1 I went into Chicago to purchase goods and, while walking along Lake Street opposite the Tremont House, looked across the street and saw a sign, *Cobb and Pritchard Book Store*. I rushed across the street, entered, and enquired if they had Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico*; and they handed down this book and its two companion volumes and two of *The Conquest of Peru*. I asked the price and to my astonishment was told \$17.50. I said, “What!” and remarked I didn’t suppose such books were worth more than 50 cents a volume. I was being served by one of the proprietors, and I finally said, “My name is Edward Ayer, I live at Harvard, I have been on the plains and in the war four years. I returned a month since. My father has given me an interest in a store. I have \$3.50 that I can spare now. If you will let me have volume one I will give you the \$3.50 I have and every month when I come in will take and pay for another volume.” He said (bless him), “Young man, you give me the \$3.50 you have and take the whole set home with you now.” My return home was a triumphal procession. I was certainly the happiest boy in the world and, of course, only touched the earth in high places.

I continued to prosper and got a fine reading library, when I got so that I had to separate the Indian works from the others. This volume was number one. About 13 years since, I took the three volumes to London and said to Mr. Zaehnsdorf, the great binder, that I had brought to him the (to me) three most valuable books in the world; that I wanted to select a Grolieresque binding and wanted him to do as good a job as possible; that these were the first books I had ever bought and that they had given me the incentive to read and taught me how interesting history was. He sent me a bill for \$180, and, if any of you who ever read this imagine for a moment that at any time during the past 30 years \$50,000 would have bought them, you are mistaken.