

A FORGOTTEN SON OF ATHENS (ILLINOIS)

Back in 1856, the "Illinois State Journal" began publishing a series of travel articles written under the pseudonym QUITO. The author first described taking ship in New York, sailing round Cape Horn and disembarking at the port of Valparaiso, Chile. After arrival, he continued to document his travels around that country, before departing for San Francisco, where he stayed for another year. In a final letter to the "Journal" from California, he expressed his hope of returning to South America early in 1860.

Who was QUITO? Why did he publish in an Illinois newspaper? We decided to find out and were lucky enough to discover the author's true identity and place of birth.

Major clues

Some articles published in the "Daily Alta California" in 1858 dealt with exactly the same Chilean travels: they were reprints of QUITO's material, but signed "J.A.R.", which we guessed might be the initials of his real name. A supporting clue was QUITO's reference to himself as "Santiago" (the Spanish translation of James).

Additionally, the editor of the Illinois newspaper disclosed that QUITO was a citizen of Menard County. We knew then to begin our search in that county, instead of Sangamon County, where the "Journal" was published.

Findings and proof

A careful search of the 1850 U.S. census for Menard County, provided a good candidate for "J.A.R.": this was James A. Rankin, aged 18, living with his parents Amberry and Arminda Rankin.

A wide smile came to our faces while checking "The History of Menard & Mason Counties, Illinois". On page 725, there was a biography of Henry B. Rankin, son of Amberry A. and Arminda Rankin, stating that his older brother, James A. "sailed for Chili, South America, by way of Cape Horn, and remained in South America sixteen years, the first part of which time was spent in travel and correspondence with various journals of the United States, ..." Later came the sad news that: "His active life in Peru was terminated by a disastrous railroad accident near Iquique, Peru, Oct. 4, 1870." James was just 38 years old.

Finally, in an 1859 San Francisco magazine we found an article and sketch by "J. A. Rankin" giving proof of his presence in California.

So, James A. Rankin (1832-1870) was our man, our QUITO.

The Writer

James Rankin was an observant traveler, equally adept at describing people and Nature, in words or in drawings. His writings demonstrate a high level of education, thanks, probably, to the influence of his mother, Arminda Rogers Rankin, who was a schoolteacher; and to his maternal grandfather, Colonel Matthew Rogers, who owned a sizeable "library" of books.

What still remains a mystery to us is James's choice of "QUITO" as his pseudonym in the "State Journal". Does it have some local significance? We'd love to know.

If you like reading first-hand descriptions of distant parts of the globe, James's narratives are available online at:
www.donduncan.org/quito/afoot_in_chile.pdf

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