

# LOUIS LACOUR

By Eric McGuire and Warren Friedrich

“Gold for the taking!” Those words were irresistible to legions of men, and even a few women, after its discovery at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma, California, in 1848. Dreamers, adventurers, thieves and just plain desperate folks trying to make a better world for themselves, all came together – nearly all setting foot in, and funneling through, San Francisco, the gateway to gold country.

A majority did not find their fortune in gold; however, many partook of the riches by way of the commerce necessitated from servicing a virtually instant republic that California became. At first, nearly everyone felt some obligation to outfit themselves with pick, shovel and pan and become immersed in the odyssey. Reality usually hit very quickly. It was backbreaking work in wilderness conditions. Many became ill, died or at best, quickly disillusioned. A few had the foresight to see the opportunities in plying their trade skills in a country literally crying for all societal services and amenities. Others, who were unskilled but energetic, saw gaping holes in the fabric of commerce and quickly filled niches, some very simple, that made them wealthy beyond their wildest dreams.

The early life of Louis Lacour is difficult to trace. He was born on February 26, 1821 in Saint-Fargeau, Borough of Joigny, Departement of l’Yonne, region of Burgundy, France, about 120 miles southeast of Paris. The son of Louis Michel Lacour and Marie-Jeanne Morignot-Epoigny, his full name was Jacques Louis Sebastien Lacour. His father was a wealthy landowner in Saint Fargeau. He died on May 14, 1843, while Louis was attending *Ecole Polytechnique* in Paris. Upon his father’s death, Louis received his inheritance but it is said that he squandered the money.<sup>(1)</sup> With little left he decided to gamble on the California gold rush. Another locally derived family tradition states that he left Paris, France, in 1849, and came to California, via New York, after he pleaded with his father to receive his family inheritance early so that he could begin a new life in California.<sup>(2)</sup>

This version is to be less believed since Louis’ father had died at least seven years before he left for California. Regardless, he arrived in San Francisco aboard the steamer *Panama* on March 21, 1851.<sup>(3)</sup> Lacour began his mining activities in the vicinity of Sonora where he continued his search for the elusive metal until 1854, when he went back to France for awhile. He returned to San Francisco on June 1, 1855, and again went to Sonora. He finally returned to San Francisco in September 1856 where he was employed as a clerk for the liquor company of A. Barbier & Co.<sup>(4)</sup> Barbier also maintained a store in Sonora which is where their association may have begun.

The early West was often a difficult theatre within which to operate a business. Lacour was no exception in encountering a variety of business troubles. While the court system was established early in San Francisco, and was a force in meting out justice from about 1855, it simply couldn’t keep up with all that was illegal – or unjust. Lacour himself was well known by the justice system, even though he was generally considered a respectable addition to the community. Friends and enemies were easily made and they often changed seats. One of Lacour’s early dealings gone awry was with Pierry Maury, a fellow Frenchman and San Francisco importer of French

liquors. One Saturday in October of 1856, Lacour could not contain his passion when a business conflict erupted into a physical confrontation at the corner of Montgomery and Washington Streets and, “*he struck Maury a severe blow in the face.*” That unfortunate deed cost Lacour a \$100 fine in Police Court<sup>(5)</sup>, but it was a pittance compared to the \$15,332.22 that Lacour was obligated to pay Maury caused by a business-related action he brought against Lacour in the Fourth District Court in the following April.<sup>(6)</sup> One can’t help but wonder how Lacour’s previous physical indiscretion may have swayed the case.

After the dissolution of Barbier’s business in that same year (1858), Lacour worked for Jean Castera, another fellow Frenchman and wholesale liquor dealer in San Francisco. Doubtless lacking in funds, Lacour did have an important business connection that could prove valuable to Castera. Lacour was able to enlist the help of his brother, living in France, to solidify business dealings with the importation of French wines. Most French wine dealers were reluctant to trade directly with San Francisco merchants for a variety of reasons, including the questionable success of the perilous journey of goods; the precarious financial solvency of the fledgling California companies; and a very real concern for not being paid for goods







The Chateau of Saint-Fargeau, once owned by the Lacour family and the home of young Louis Lacour.

that were shipped. Castera contributed \$9,000 and Lacour committed \$5,000 to the new company and a successful business was born under the name of Castera & Co.<sup>(7)</sup> By late in 1859, the company was renamed Castera & Lacour which reflected an equal partnership. Lacour was considered the more outgoing representative of the company who was known about town and much more accepting of American business practices. Castera preferred to stay behind the scene. He was a quiet man, described as a gentleman, but spoke very little English. He kept the books and dealt more directly with the now well-formed relationship developed with French liquor dealers, most importantly *Bouche, Fils & Cie.* of Mareuil-sur-Ay, France, with a branch office in New York City.

Dynamics within the company were about to change. P.H. Canavan arrived in San Francisco in 1861. He was employed by Castera & Lacour as a clerk, but by January 1, 1863, he held an interest in the firm. Including salary, he was given 7.5% of the profits during the first year and 10% for the following two years. A significant disagreement occurred between the three partners and in December of the same year Lacour dissolved his interest. Along with Canavan, Jean Castera reformed the business as Castera & Co. It appears that Castera and Canavan were of similar business mind and Lacour could no longer tolerate what he saw as unacceptable business practices. Lacour was about

to rock the City of San Francisco by exposing activities that were commonly known only to liquor companies dealing with their French counterparts.

In a series of moves that were probably calculated, Lacour insisted that the financial books of Castera & Lacour be physically moved to another "neutral" site so that during the dissolution process of the partnership he may have access to their contents. They were moved to the

business of Theodore LeRoy, a trusted mutual friend and fellow wholesale liquor dealer. Equally as important, Lacour relinquished his interest in the partnership's last shipment of champagne from France, consisting of 900 cases, which was currently under sail to San Francisco in the ship *Jean Bart*, from Bordeaux. In a bold move that must have been not only very difficult to perform, but also alienated him from many of his French countrymen, he became an informant with regard to a revenue tax scam that had defrauded the government out of thousands of dollars. Lacour also informed U.S. Customs of the location of Castera & Lacour's financial records, which were promptly seized by government agents at Theodore LeRoy's store, thus forming a virtual ironclad case against Castera.

When the 900 cases of champagne arrived in San Francisco on February 4, 1864, the cargo was immediately seized, and along with the books, became further evidence in a federal District Court case that became known as "The United States vs. 900 Cases of Champagne." The trial began in February 1865. Castera claimed he was the sole owner of the champagne that arrived via the ship *Jean Bart* since his earlier settlement in dissolving the partnership with Lacour left Castera



Lacour family tombstones in the cemetery of Louis Lacour's home town village of Saint Fargeau, France. Louis Lacour's mother and father are represented on the left half of the stone on the right. (Photo courtesy of Florence Frigola, Ville d'Avray, France)



holding all the seized property.

While Castera had cut a deal with *Bouche, Fils & Cie.* to purchase the champagne for one price, the invoice received from *Bouche* that accompanied the champagne was fraudulently reduced by \$2,114. Since the *ad valorem* duty (i.e., U.S. liquor tax) was assessed at 50% of the value, and the value was normally based on the invoice price, the government was defrauded by \$1,574. The evidence mounting against Castera was overwhelming and since Lacour was no longer a partner in the firm (and was also the informant), the burden of the perpetrated fraud fell completely upon Jean Castera. The government prevailed in this case, which was the first of several similar cases that shook the financial community, and Jean Castera mysteriously disappeared about six weeks before the trial started, with the assumption that he left the country. Castera was well aware that he was faced with an \$11,000 fine and jail time. Apparently Canavan played such a minor role that he was not charged.

Immediately after dissolving his partnership with Castera and Canavan, Lacour had established his own business, "Louis Lacour & Co., importers and wholesale dealers brandies, champagnes, and wines, 206 and 208 Jackson street."<sup>(8)</sup>

M.J. McManus was Lacour's employee, but very little is known about him. He was, however, one of the two

**THE UNDERSIGNED WILL TRANSACT** business at Nos. 206 and 208 Jackson street, as Importers and Wholesale Dealers in French Brandies, Champagne, and other wines, under the firm name of

**LOUIS LACOUR & CO.**

They solicit the patronage of their friends and the public. del5-1m

**DISSOLUTION OF CO-PARTNERSHIP.**  
—The co-partnership heretofore existing under the name and style of **CASTERA & LACOUR**, is this day dissolved by mutual consent. Either party will sign in liquidation.

**J. E. CASTERA,  
L. LACOUR.**

San Francisco, December 1st, 1863. del1-3w

**NOTICE OF CO-PARTNERSHIP.—THE** undersigned have this day formed a co-partnership, under the name and style of **J. E. CASTERA & CO.**

The general nature of the business to be transacted by said firm is the importing, buying and selling of foreign wines and liquors, and their place of business, 540 Washington street, San Francisco.

**J. E. CASTERA,  
P. H. CANAVAN.**

San Francisco, December 1, 1863. del2-1m

Three adjoining newspaper legal notices published in the *Daily Alta California* in December 1863 and January 1864 described the establishment of Louis Lacour & Co., the dissolution of Castera & Lacour, and the reformation of J. E. Castera & Co., with P.H. Canavan as the silent partner.

Between Jackson and Pacific.

**GENUINE HEIDSIECK CHAMPAGNE,**  
**Celebrated Brand,**  
(Established in 1788 at Rheims, and introduced in the United States in 1826 by Heidsieck & Co.)

**P. MAURY, Junior,**  
Sole Agent in California.

I AM CONSTANTLY WELL SUPPLIED with the above celebrated brand of wine, directly, by the Messrs. Heidsieck & Co., at Rheims, which I offer for sale in lots to suit.

P. MAURY, Jr., 170 Sansome street, del4-1f Between Jackson and Pacific, San Francisco.

**DIAMONDS,**  
RECEIVED FROM AMSTERDAM AND for sale by **JAMES DE FREMERY,** del22-2w 407 Merchant street, near Battery.

**LOUIS LACOUR & CO.,**  
Nos. 206 and 208 Jackson street,  
IMPORTERS & WHOLESALE DEALERS  
...IN...  
**FRENCH BRANDIES, CHAMPAGNE**  
AND OTHER WINES.

They solicit the patronage of their friends and the public del2-1m

Louis Lacour's first newspaper ad for his fledgling company appeared in the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* of December 12, 1863. By some quirk of fate it appeared just below the ad for P. Maury, to whom Lacour had lost a large court settlement in 1857.

witnesses to Lacour's bitters bottle federal design patent application. By 1867, Lacour shifted his emphasis from imported liquors to their manufacture. He also manufactured a cordial with the unusual name of *The Elegant*, which was obviously a head-on competitor to *The Excellent* brand that was marketed by the well-established partnership of Barry & Patten in San Francisco.<sup>(9)</sup> The *Elegant* was a cognac base to which was added coffee, Peruvian bark and other proprietary ingredients.<sup>(10)</sup> Lacour also manufactured his Lacour's Essence of Jamaica Ginger, a ginger based alcohol laden product which was popular at the time and sold by a number of competitors.<sup>(11)</sup> None of these products are known to have been packaged in embossed bottles.

Lacour's primary focus was his Sarsapariphère Bitters, for which he is best known. He committed a considerable marketing effort to the product, including designing a unique bottle, vaguely representative of a light-house, and received a design patent for the shape in 1868.<sup>(12)</sup> The advertisement to the left appeared in a number of newspapers throughout the western United States in 1868 and early 1869.

In order to provide further market protection, Lacour copyrighted the label for his product, incorporating his unique

**L. LACOUR & CO.,**  
MANUFACTURERS,  
**SAN FRANCISCO.**

MANUFACTURE ALL THE LI-  
queurs and Cordials of modern times, and  
would especially call the attention of the Public  
to their

**LACOUR'S**  
**Sarsapariphère**  
**BITTERS!**

[1st PREMIUM AWARDED AT LATE STATE FAIR]

Manufactured, as the name denotes, from Sar-  
saparilla and other healthy roots and herbs, a  
CERTAIN BLOOD PURIFIER.

**"The Elegant!"**

Lately introduced, and the most celebrated of  
modern appetizers and *pousse cafe*, an undoubted  
remedy for DYSPEPSIA and other STOMACH COM-  
PLAINTS, it being composed of fine French  
Cognac, distilled with Coffee, Peruvian Bark  
and other anti-dyspeptic ingredients, leaving  
the breath sweet and balmy.

**LACOUR'S**  
ESSENCE OF  
**Jamaica Ginger.**

An article equal to any Imported, and greatly  
superior to any other manufactured in this  
State.

Sold by every respectable Jobber and Drug-  
gist on the Pacific coast.

To guard against counterfeits, be certain that  
our trade mark (a Light House) is stamped on  
every case and package.

aug12:1y **L. LACOUR & CO.**

conjunctive word SARSAPARIPHERE, strongly suggesting the use of sarsaparilla root along with the suffix similar to the French word for lighthouse — *phare*.<sup>(13)</sup>

Lacour proudly advertised the merits of his marketing efforts surrounding his bitters and bottle by pronouncing . . . "their unrivaled sale has attracted remarks and criticisms of the trade. Jealousy attributes their success to the fineness of their general style, and principally to the originality and beauty of the bottle which was conceived and manufactured by California artists."<sup>(14)</sup>

Who actually designed the bottle is not known; however, representatives of the San Francisco Glass Works undoubtedly had some involvement. The evidence is strong that Carlton Newman's glass works blew at least some, if not all, of the Lacour's Bitters bottles. As a result of the fire that caused a complete loss of the San Francisco Glass Works



on July 24, 1868, Newman was forced to declare bankruptcy, since he was woefully underinsured. The records of the resultant bankruptcy action list Louis Lacour as a creditor, which may be interpreted as either due to the cost of unblown bottles owed Lacour or the cost of the private bottle mold(s) owned by Lacour and held by the San Francisco Glass Works, which were likely destroyed in the fire.

The Sarsapariphère Bitters label

is a story in itself. Produced by G.T. Brown & Co., Grafton Tyler Brown was the black son of freed slaves who came to California in the late 1850s. He is considered California's first black sketch artist. First employed by Charles C. Kuchel, previously of the firm of Kuchel & Dresel, he worked as a lithographer and eventually started his own business in 1866 when Kuchel died. Brown's real passion was scenic art and eventually produced striking views of western towns

## United States Patent Office.

LOUIS LACOUR, OF SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA.

Design No. 2,915, dated February 4, 1868.

### DESIGN FOR A BOTTLE.

The Schedule referred to in these Letters Patent and making part of the same.

#### TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Be it known that I, LOUIS LACOUR, of the city and county of San Francisco, and State of California, have originated and designed a new Pattern for Bottles, of which the following is a full, clear, and exact description, reference being had to the accompanying drawings, making a part of this specification—

Being a bottle having four panels, two large ones, with oblong or rounded heads, moulded and shaped as more fully shown in accompanying drawings, and more especially in Figure 2 of said drawings. The smaller panels are square and oblong, and moulded and lettered, as shown in Figures 1 and 3 of said drawings, to wit, on one panel the word "Sarsapariphère," on the other, panel "Lacour's Bitters." Also two brads above the base, and one near the top, as fully shown in drawings, the shape of the bottle being round, and in every particular corresponding with the drawing accompanying this specification, and forming a part thereof.

#### Claim.

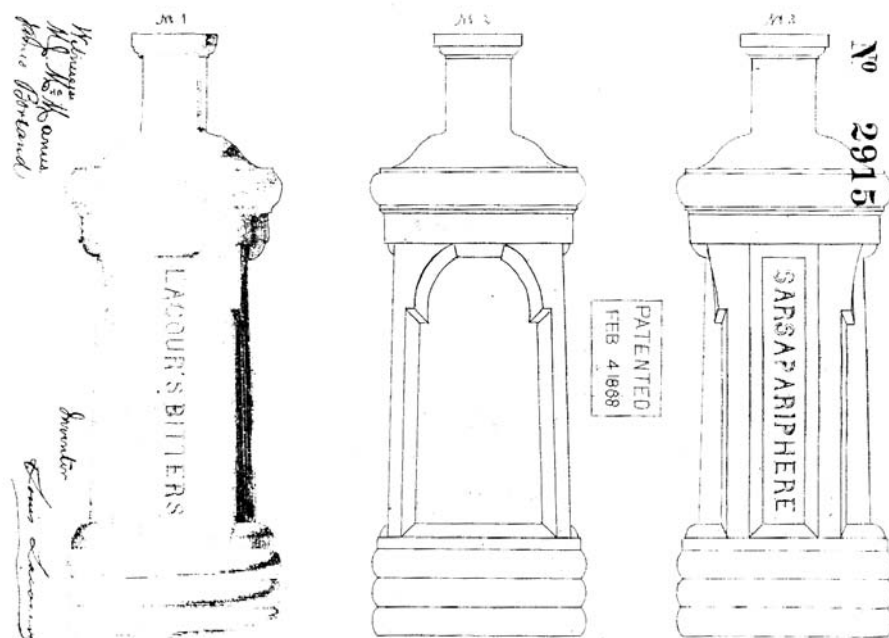
Having thus fully described my invention, what I claim, and desire to secure by Letters Patent, is—  
The design or pattern for bottles substantially as herein set forth and shown.

Witnesses:

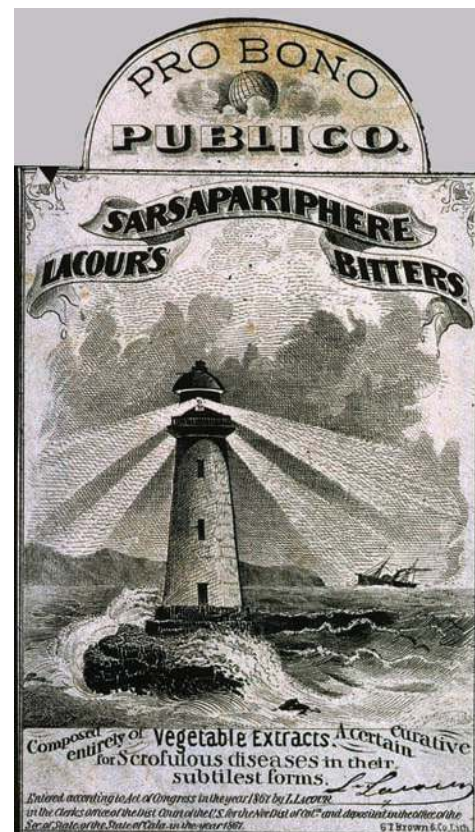
M. J. McMANUS,  
JAMES BORLAND.

LOUIS LACOUR.

A copy of the U.S. Patent Office record for Lacour's unique bitters bottle – noted as Design Patent No. 2,915, and dated February 4, 1868.



The design patent drawings as submitted by Louis Lacour for his bitters bottle.



A copy of the front label for Lacour's Bitters. The reverse label was also accommodated by the domed upper portion of the indented panel on the bottle, just as on the front. It also carried the essential wording but had no cut of a lighthouse. Instead it contained text relating to directions for use.

and landscapes. He left California for Canada in 1882 and continued traveling throughout the West producing etchings and drawings. Brown died in 1918.

There are three separate molds from which the Lacours bitters bottles were blown. All are very similar with only minor variations detected. It is not possible to determine which mold was made first or why more than one mold was made for a bottle that didn't achieve production levels great enough to cause a mold to wear out. We can only speculate on a number of scenarios, some of which include:

- The original mold was damaged in an accident or lost.
- More than one mold was initially produced, thus allowing for a quicker production run. Each mold had its own associated lipping tool.
- After the original mold was destroyed in the San Francisco Glass Works fire, later molds were made for use at the Pacific Glass Works, the only competitor in town.

Based on excavations that included the variant specimens it appears that all were made contemporaneously, or at least within such a short time span that determining an age and order of the different molds has not been successful.

All but the most discerning collector probably couldn't tell the difference between the three mold variants of the Lacour's Sarsapariphère Bitters bottles. There are however several distinguishing features that set them apart. Probably the earliest variant which follows closely to the drawing that accompanies the Letters Patent, is recognizable by the period that follows the word, "Bitters."

Two other features not seen on the other two variants are the original shoulder designs, seen in the original drawing, and the full bottom ring profile.

The Variant 2 mold is a transition bottle, featuring characteristics seen



**The most distinguishing feature of the Variant 1 bottle is the period at the end of the word BITTERS. Variants 2 and 3 lack this feature.**

on the earlier bottle as well as the later bottle. This bottle is seen with the same style lettering as the first variant, as well as the same style of top. A similar dot in the center of the base is also seen, although it is of a slightly larger size. Two very different features of this bottle are the re-design of the shoulder area and top ring, the ring being of a more elliptical shape. The bottom ring profile is less than full-size, being more like two-thirds of a full arc.

The third variant is seen with characteristics of the second mold design and none of the first design. Distinguishing characteristics that set this bottle apart from Variants 1 and 2 are the design of the top, this being unique,



**The lipping tool used to form the top of Variants 1 and 2 is either the same or they are separate but identical.**



**The lipping tool used to form the top on Variant 3 is slightly different from the shape of Variants 1 and 2.**

and a completely different lettering font to the embossing as well. Further, no dot appears in the center of the base. This mold design does however feature the re-designed shoulder & upper ring area and the two-thirds ring arc at the base with the second mold.

Variant 1 Lacour's bottles have been found in colors of green, amber & aqua and all shades in between. Variant 2 bottles are mostly seen in shades of yellowish green, olive yellow and olive amber, while variant 3 bottles are found in different shades of amber.

### CHANGES IN THE LIFE OF LOUIS LACOUR

Changes were occurring in the life of Louis Lacour. The latest advertisements for Lacour and his products, were in 1869, and it is highly probable that no more bitters bottles were blown after the glassworks fire. Lacour seems to have changed his career direction about this time. Francois Louis Albert Pioche, the wealthy San Francisco banker, had developed a relationship with Lacour. Pioche had invested heavily in a mining claim in Lincoln County, Nevada, forming the Meadow Valley Mining

Company in early 1868. The mining population was drawn like a magnet and generally congregated in a settlement informally called "Pioche's Camp." Further, it is documented that *"the city was located in 1869 by P. McCannon, L. Lacour and A.M. Bush. . ."*<sup>(15)</sup> An enduring legacy of this action is the main street in Pioche which is named in honor of Lacour.

In a letter written by Mrs. Carmichael Williamson, and read at the meeting of the formation of the Ely Mining District, within which Pioche's Camp was situated, stated:

*"Meadow Valley, February 20, 1869*

*"Messrs. Smith, Townsend, McNeill and Others – Locating the City of the Future:*

*"Gentlemen – With many thanks for the compliment allowing me to suggest a name for your City, I offer for your consideration 'Pioche'..*

*"Most Respectfully,  
S.E.C. Williamson"*<sup>(16)</sup>

The true business relationship between Louis Lacour and F.L.A. Pioche is not clear, but it is known that the burgeoning new southern Nevada city was literally crying for supplies of all kinds. Lacour's trip to Pioche was at least dual in purpose. Not only did he have a hand in laying out the new city, he brought with him supplies that could be readily turned into a profit. *"A man by the name of Lacour had put in a stock of goods. For prospectors 'all broke' and ready for anything that would furnish grub this was great news."*<sup>(17)</sup> One wonders how much of his remaining stock of LACOUR'S SARSAPARIPHERE BITTERS went with him to the wild mining town of Pioche, a place that challenges Tombstone, Arizona, as the most lawless and bullet ridden settlement in the American West.

Not all of his remaining bitters inventory went to Nevada, however. With a mind to lighten the burden, Lacour actually sold most of his remaining bitters to his main competition, the Cassin Brothers! This act is verified by an advertisement in the Daily Evening Bulletin, running from April 19<sup>th</sup> to May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1870.



**PRO BONO PUBLICO.**

**CALL FOR LACOUR'S CELEBRATED  
SARSAPARPHERE BITTERS,**

A delightful Temperance Tonic. Price reduced to six dollars a case, in fancy, light house bottles.

Country merchants send your orders to  
ap19-1m2p-z-z-s F. & P. J. CASSIN, 323 Frontstreet, S. F.

The final advertisement for Lacour's Bitters confirms that the remaining stock was being discounted by F. & P.J. Cassin, Lacour's primary local competition in the fancy bitters market. Note the misspelling of the product name, which was not the first time this occurred.

Louis Lacour was still residing in Pioche in June of 1870 when the census taker documented him living with another Frenchman, E.M. Chantille, and Tom Klean, from Massachusetts. Curiously, Lacour's occupation is listed as a "miner"<sup>(18)</sup>. The census records often assigned this occupation to individuals who owned mining interests but never even picked up a shovel. He soon returned to San Francisco and gained a seat on the California Stock Exchange, probably with the help of Pioche, thus ending his former life's work.

He continued on as a stock broker until his death on May 25, 1873, at the age of 53 years. *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported his death with the possibility that it may have been a suicide. It reported that "**Mr. Lacour has been a daily mourner at the tomb of his deceased wife. Ever since her burial his thoughts seem to be riveted on her memory...**" Along with financial losses associated with Baltimore Consolidated mining stocks, the paper opined that an overdose of morphine was taken to solve his problems.<sup>(19)</sup>

*The Alta* gave an account of the respect accorded Louis Lacour at the time of his demise:

#### DEATH OF LOUIS LACOUR

*At a meeting of the California Stock Exchange Board held May 26<sup>th</sup> 1873, the President stated that one of the members, Louis Lacour, had died on the 25<sup>th</sup> instant, whereupon it was,*

*Resolved, That the Board do now adjourn for the day, and the members attend the funeral; and that a Committee be appointed to draft resolutions expressive of the feelings of the Board upon their loss.*

*Later in the day the Board came together, and the Committee reported as follows:*

*Mr. PRESIDENT: Your Committee, appointed to report resolutions of respect to the memory of our deceased brother, beg leave to submit the following:*

*WHEREAS, Louis Lacour, a member in good standing of this California Stock Exchange Board, departed this life on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of May, 1873; and whereas, he was esteemed by all his acquaintances as a genial, good-hearted gentleman, possessed of strict integrity, and tenacious of honorable dealing with his fellow men, be it*

*Resolved, That the feeling of this body is one of deep sorrow at his sudden and untimely demise, and we will never cease to cherish a recollection of his many good traits and a high respect for his memory.*

*Resolved, That the Board room be draped in mourning for thirty days.*

*Resolved, That these resolutions be spread upon the minutes and a copy be sent to the surviving members of the family.*

*All of which was received, and, on motion, unanimously adopted.*

*A true copy:*

*W. William Lawton Secretary,  
California Stock Exchange Board*<sup>(20)</sup>

While Louis Lacour was, in fact, a scion of San Francisco, he died in San Rafael, Marin County, about 30 miles north of the great city. He was well known in San Rafael, as he had often taken up summer residence there, and his father-in-law, Richard Nickerson Berry, an equally well known California pioneer, had purchased considerable property there in 1866<sup>(21)</sup>. Lacour died at the home of Berry, a particularly sad occasion greatly compounded by the fact that Louis Lacour's wife had died just a few weeks earlier. Just as they had done for Louis Lacour's funeral, the entire board of the California Stock Exchange had attended Georgie Lacour's funeral as well. Married to Louis Lacour in 1860, Georgianna Berry Lacour (Georgie) was only 32 years old when she died on April 10, 1873, at the home of her parents in San Rafael.<sup>(22)</sup>

The local San Rafael newspaper refuted the possibility that Lacour would consider suicide, and attempted to weave a picture of ill health and accidental overdose that led to his demise:

*"The circumstances of his death are*

*peculiarly painful, and have been needlessly aggravated by unfounded reports that it was produced by his own voluntary act. Love of the marvelous is a passion so fierce with some people that it will feed on falsehood, and even traduce the dead. Mr. Lacour was in feeble health, and suffered, as so many of our business men do, from insomnia, in addition to a chronic bowel disorder. He was taking an opiate, which must have been stronger than he supposed, or else he mistook the quantity, for he took an overdose, and death resulted in about eighteen hours, during which he was unconscious."*<sup>(23)</sup>

One can't help but wonder of the circumstances of the deaths, as well as the lives, of both Georgie and Louis Lacour, and the role that opiates may have played. At the age of eight years, Georgie was a vibrant and healthy young girl who endured the southern route of the Overland Trail, traveling from Boston to San Francisco. At the time of her death she was described as lingering toward her demise with fading physique over a period of at least two months.

These particularly painful deaths were even more compounded by the orphaning of the Lacour's three children; Eugene, born in 1862; Louis, born in 1863, and Alford (aka Alfred), born in 1870. The three were not denied the material necessities accorded children of affluent families. All were boarded with their aunt, the remaining child of Richard Berry. Her name was Van Sickie Berry Russell (Vannie). She had married Edwin Russell, a real estate broker, reported to be a titled "Lord" and native of England.<sup>(24)</sup> They were married in the parlor of Hall McAllister, a well known San Francisco attorney for whom McAllister Street is named in that same city. As fate would conduct the business of life, Edwin and Vannie Russell had no children of their own. Likewise, the Lacour boys had no issue. Only one ventured into matrimony. Alfred was a clerk in San Francisco and married Susie K. Jones there in 1891, but apparently he wasn't suited for marriage. Susie sued for divorce on the grounds of willful neglect, which was granted December 17, 1896.<sup>(25)</sup> Alfred was already gone from San Francisco before his divorce and eventually moved to Fresno County, dying there on May 13, 1906. He had no children.

All but Eugene died relatively young, and he lived a long and interesting life. Eugene Lacour became the manager of one of the largest coffee plantations in Guatemala and later worked in the cement business. He eventually bought and managed a hotel in Fresno, California, finally succumbing there on October 31, 1949.<sup>(26)</sup> When the Lacour boys were orphaned, Georgie's parents were in no condition to have cared for the three youngsters since Richard Berry was also lost to death just six weeks after Louis Lacour passed away.<sup>(27)</sup> The earlier generation vanished with the death of Richard Berry's wife, Margaretta. She had moved to Portland with her daughter Vannie, and son-in-law, and died there on May 22, 1875. Her body was transported back to San Rafael to

lie next to Richard and her daughter Georgie Lacour.

This brief story of the life of Louis Lacour was originally planned to end with a photograph of his tombstone, which surely must have been created upon his death. It is known that he was buried in the old city cemetery located adjacent to St. Paul's Episcopal Church at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and E Streets in San Rafael, California. Also buried there were his wife, father-in-law and mother-in-law. The old cemetery had experienced neglect even by the time of Lacour's burial. In fact, just a few years later some members of the community began a push to have the cemetery removed.

Despite the cry for removal, no action was taken in this regard until 1897 when a petition signed by various individuals was presented to the city Board of Trustees requesting the cemetery removal.<sup>(28)</sup> Since the old cemetery was near to the public grammar school, the Board of Education promptly requested the potentially vacated cemetery be made available for school purposes.<sup>(29)</sup> In February of 1898 Ordinance 323 was finally introduced and passed by the San Rafael Board of Trustees. The ordinance defined the end of the final resting place for many of the city's earliest pioneers, including Louis Lacour. Ordinance 323 read, in part:

**"Sec. 3. – It shall be the duty of any and all persons interested in the human remains interred as heretofore stated, to exhume and remove the same beyond said city's limits, and if such exhumation and removal is not done within 90 days after notice to do the same has been published, for at least two weeks, in at least two newspapers printed, published and circulated in Marin County, then the City of San Rafael shall proceed to exhume and remove all human remains that have not been exhumed and removed."**

About a half dozen grave stones, and probably associated bodies, were removed by family heirs to other local cemeteries. The unclaimed remains were then supposedly exhumed and removed to the Mt. Tamalpais Cemetery located just outside the city limits. A contract

was awarded to Stephen Eden, a local undertaker, to remove the bodies and the task was reported as completed by October 1898.<sup>(30)</sup>

Now, the difficulty in determining the last resting place of Louis Lacour has become exasperating since his and his family's gravestones cannot be located in local cemeteries. Further, in a 1905 newspaper article, it becomes clear that complete exhumation of the old cemetery was not thoroughly accomplished:

**"The old cemetery between the Episcopal church and high school building is anything but attractive. Only a few graves remain, and they are not kept in the best condition."**<sup>(31)</sup>

This statement implies that a few graves remained and were located between St. Paul's Church and the new high school building. The attached Sanborn fire insurance map, dated 1887, provides a good representation of the relationship between the church and the grave yard site. A later Sanborn fire insurance map depicts the same area as it was in 1907. (The grave yard site is outlined in yellow)

Even after the old cemetery had later been cleaned of all its grave stones, and supposedly all its residents, the following 1936 newspaper article appeared:

**"Contractors operating a steam shovel on school property at the corner of Fourth and E streets, where a deep excavation is under way, uncovered remains of several graves Monday. "Location of the shovel was immediately changed to another part of the lot, which was formerly used as a burying ground. This cemetery plot was abandoned in the year 1898, and many of the graves were removed to Tamalpais Cemetery."**<sup>(32)</sup>

Could it be that the mortal remains of the Lacour and Berry families have been host to the laughing, dancing, running and playing children of generations of San Rafael children atop their final resting place? Or, have they been moved to the quiet sanctuary of a common grave at the Mt. Tamalpais Cemetery? The cemetery records are

## HE SAW A GHOST.

### An Apparition Frightens H. E. Reeves.

### The Vision Vanished When He Spoke.

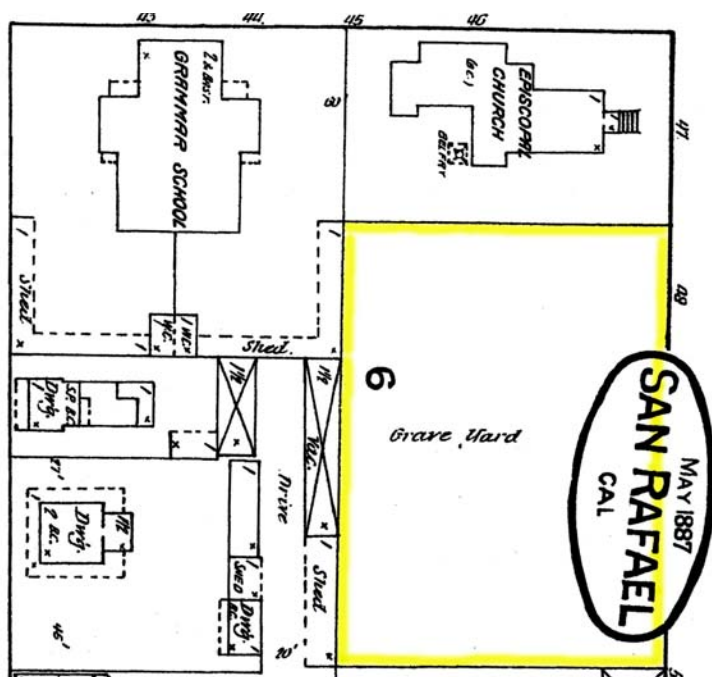
#### Edwin Russell's Phantom Antici- pates the Messenger of His Death.

The old saying that truth is stranger than fiction found a startling exemplification in this city on Friday evening. The ghostly vision in the melodrama of the "Corsican Brothers" is scarcely more fruitful of grisly reflections than the tale which was told to a CHRONICLE reporter yesterday by a gentleman who would be at once pronounced the last person in the world to become the prey of superstition or the victim of delusion.

Early on Friday morning Edwin Russell, an Englishman, well known as a real estate agent, was walking near the corner of Sutter and Mason streets when he sustained an apoplectic stroke, from the effects of which he died shortly before noon. He had resided in the city ten years.

A strange tale appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle at the time of Edwin Russell's death (Louis Lacour's brother-in-law). He had recently befriended a fellow church choir singer, Harry E. Reeves, who claimed he was visited by the ghost of the departed Edwin Russell about three hours after his death. The article, which is quite long, and truncated in this





A portion of the City of San Rafael Sanborn Map for 1887 showing the location of the City Burying Ground where Louis Lacour was originally interred and may still reside. The church where memorial services were held for he and his wife is located directly to the North (top) of the grave yard.

silent on their fate, and their gravestones appear to be long gone, at best buried out of sight by the contractor who "cleaned up" the old cemetery, perhaps to be discovered another day. Many years ago, the school property was sold and the old structure was remodeled into an office building. The likely resting place of Louis Lacour is now a paved parking lot, or under the office building. The old adjacent St. Paul's Episcopal Church where Lacour's obsequies were so eloquently received by the entire board of the San Francisco Stock Exchange in 1873, has been relocated and the site is currently a bank building. No doubt the site will be witness to other changes in the future.

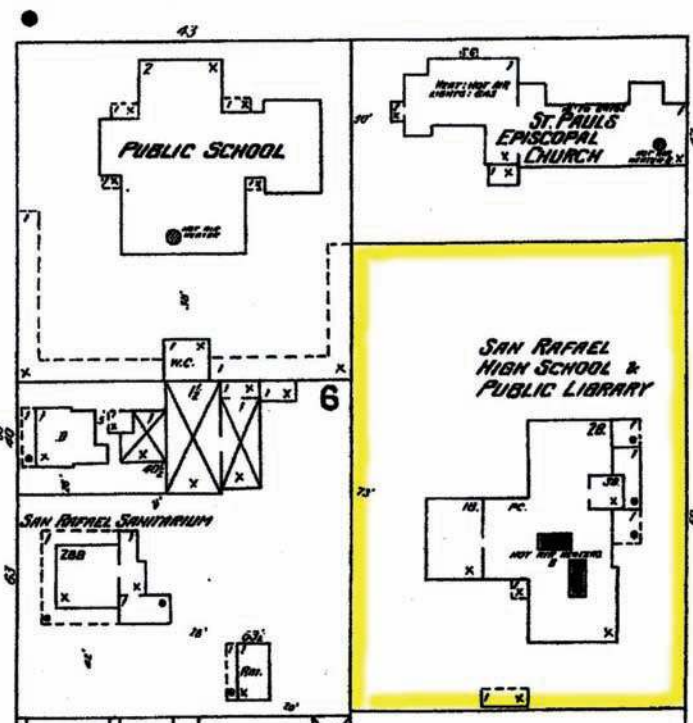
Rumors within the neighborhood of the cemetery allude to the existence of at least some of the old grave stones, possibly including Lacour's, as building material in the local houses. In fact, one such story was acted upon with the perpetual hope that a gravestone could be that of Louis Lacour. A local resident told me of a tombstone behind one of the nearby houses. A telephone call to the owner of the house was well received with an invitation to look at and photograph the stone. Leaning against her fence was a ragged marble slab that was discovered in the 1990's when the house was lifted.



The broken and long lost grave stone of Jean LaPage was located in the yard of a house adjacent to the old San Rafael Cemetery. Many of the old stones, including that of Louis Lacour, probably suffered the same fate, or worse.

**Memory of  
JOHN LE PAGE  
Died  
May 22, 1875  
Aged 42 Years  
A Native of France**

The errant stone proved to be that of Jean La Page, a French immigrant who was described as a "wood dealer" in the



The same area as shown in the 1887 Sanborn Map is shown here in the 1907 edition of the same map. It can be seen that the old graveyard site was occupied by the new high school.

1870 census. As a fellow Frenchman, he possibly knew Louis Lacour since they both lived in the same part of town, but there is no other apparent connection. La Page died at a young 43 years of age, on May 25, 1875, leaving a small son and wife. Oddly, his son died within a few years as well, leaving only the widow to grieve. She died in 1892. By strange coincidence La Page's death notice appeared next to that of Louis Lacour's mother-in-law in the local newspaper.<sup>(33)</sup>

DIED.	
BERRY—At the residence of her daughter, Mrs. Edwin Russell, at Portland, Oregon, May 22d, Margaretta A. H. Berry, relict of the late Richard N. Berry, of San Rafael, aged 53 years.	LE PAGE—In San Rafael, 25th instant, John Le Page, a native of France, aged 41 years.

By strange coincidence Louis Lacour's mother-in-law and John LaPage shared the same death notice column in the local newspaper.

Thus ends a brief look into the life of a California pioneer whose exploits and name had slipped into a void of disinterest. His name has only recently been resurrected by virtue of the artistic and aesthetic qualities of a lowly glass bottle he once produced and now has a value – even empty of the product it held – that Louis Lacour could never dream possible.



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- (8) *Langley's San Francisco City Directory, October 1864. San Francisco, California.*
- (9) *The EXCELLENT was registered in the U.S. District Court, Northern District of California, Copyright registration, April 24, 1865; California Trademark No. 96, registered March 11, 1868; and, federal patent No. 75837, registered March 24, 1868.*
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- (29) *ibid., Pg. 219, November 1, 1897.*
- (30) *ibid., Pg. 310, October 7, 1898).*
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## EPILOGUE

Just as we will never know the answer to many questions raised about the life of Louis Lacour and his bitters bottle, so also is the fate of Dick, the Lacour family dog, who was separated from his home as noted by the Alta California on October 16, 1863.



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