

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Convention Reporter

During California's centennial years, several books were published which had for their historical background the City of Monterey, several of which were most outstanding both for reader interest and for correct interpretation of the period in history to which they applied. Among the most satisfying were "The Lives of W.E.P. Hartnell" by Dakin and the recent publication "Muleback to the Convention" which is composed of letters of J. Ross Browne, the reporter to the Constitutional Convention in Monterey, November and October of 1849. The later was published by the Book Club of California, the history of which we discussed in the Diary on Friday.

"On August 5, 1849, J. Ross Browne, a slim, blue-eyed, vigorous man of 26, stepped eagerly ashore at the little frame house and canvas town of San Francisco. Six and a half months earlier he had said goodbye to his wife and two children at Washington and set sail from New York to round the Horn.

"This young man, Irish, gayly adventurous, by turn dreamily romantic and clear-sightedly critical, became in his time well-known as a traveler, writer and lecturer."

Before the age of 17, J. Ross Browne made his first considerable expedition. With a young companion he covered some 600 miles of the Western States mostly on foot. He later worked as a police reporter and still later as a shorthand reporter and stenographer in Washington assisting his father, who was then reporting Congressional proceedings for the "Globe." During this period he had some tales published in Graham's magazine, then edited by Edgar Allen Poe.

Soon after a trip to Europe and his return to Washington in 1844, Ross Browne married Lucy Anna Mitchell, daughter of Dr. Spencer Cochrane Mitchell, a physician of Washington, D.C. None of Lucy's letters to her husband have survived but she saved his to her, and we got a picture of her character as it exists in his many ardent love letters: "You have character, you have affections, you have good judgment and a great internal power. You have something upon love can rest."

After his marriage Browne settled down to a job as clerk in the treasury department, where he later became

private secretary to the Hon. Robert J. Walker, then Secretary of the Treasury. But when the gold rush fever reached the East Coast Ross Browne was not one to resist it long. He obtained an appointment as 3rd lieutenant in the Revenue Service on the Pacific Coast, with instructions to assemble information as to the best mean of preventing the desertion of seamen to the gold fields. His first letters to his wife tell of his significant connection with California history, that of his appointment to report the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention at Monterey.

The account of J. Ross Browne's "Muleback to the Convention," is of particular interest to the Peninsula because he was the grandfather of Mrs. Hugh Comstock of Carmel and because the volume contains a reprint of the original contract between Browne and the finance committee of the Monterey Convention, the original of which is owned by Thomas W. Norris of Carmel, and which has been on display in Colton Hall during the past week. In "Acknowledgements" Mr. Norris is thanked for making available the facsimile reproduction.

His account of his experiences on the island of Juan Fernandez appeared under the title of "Crusoe's Island" in Harper's Monthly, along with an article which he called "A Dangerous Journey" based on other experiences real and (doubtless) vicarious, of his ride from San Francisco to San Luis Obispo.

On the voyage home in November of 1849, he worked up his shorthand notes made at the convention, "The Report of the Debates in the Convention of California on the Formation of the State Constitution in September and October, 1849" was published in Washington, D.C., in 1850. An edition in Spanish was issued in New York the following year. An article which appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle of February 13, 1881, states: 'The manner in which the crude efforts of the early legislators of California were upon this occasion pruned down and dressed up by the enterprising shorthand writer was ever afterwards a source of merriment to the initiated.'

(More Tomorrow)