

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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End of a Saga

We will continue the story today of the Indian woman who spent 18 long years on San Nicholas Island in the Santa Barbara chain of islands.

After she had been found by Captain Brown, the master of the schooner, in her roofless retreat in the bushes, he stepped before her and spoke. She gave a frightened look into his face, ran a few steps, but instantly controlling herself, stood still, and addressed him in an unknown language.

In her retreat, Brown saw a mound of grass, woven baskets full of things, and a rude knife made of a piece of iron hoop, thrust into a wooden handle. A fire smouldered near, and a pile of bones lay in the ashes. The complexion of the woman was much fairer than the ordinary Indian, her personal appearance pleasing; features regular, her hair, thick and brown, falling about her shoulders in a tangled mat. From the time Brown arrived within hearing, she kept up a continual talking to herself. She was leaning forward, shading her eyes with her hands, watching the men crossing the flat below. After watching them with anxiety impossible to be depicted, the story declares, she crouched in terror, but immediately started up as if to run.

She was dressed in a tunic-shaped dress made of bird's plumage, low in the neck, sleeveless, and reaching to the ankle. She seemed to be between 40 and 50 years of age, in fine physical condition, with well-formed neck and arms and unwrinkled face.

As the men came up she greeted them, with simple dignity not without its effect upon both Indians and white men, made them welcome and set about preparing food from her simple store. The meal consisted of roasted roots, called carcomites. True hospitality.

Among the Indian crew there were several dialects spoken but none of the party were able to converse with their hostess or understand a word she uttered, and they were forced to try to make her know by signs that she was expected to join them. Brown went through the motions of packing her things in baskets, shouldering them, and walking toward the beach. She understood and started at once to make preparation. Her effects were neatly packed in her baskets, one of

which she swung over her back and taking a burning stick from the fire, she started with a firm tread after the Indians to the shore.

When the schooner was reached she went aboard without any trouble, sat down near the stove in the cabin, and quietly watched the men at their work.

To replace her feather dress which she wished to preserve, Brown made her a petticoat of ticking, and with a man's cotton shirt and a gay neckerchief, her semi-civilized dress was complete.

That the woman had faith in a supreme power was evinced soon after the schooner set sail from the fishing grounds. A gale overtook them, and the passengers made signs that she should stop the wind. With her face turned in the direction from which the storm came, she uttered words of prayer until the wind had subsided, then turned with beaming countenance and motioned that her petition had been answered.

When they approached Santa Barbara, an ox team passed along the beach. The stranger was completely bewildered. Capt. Nidever's son, who had been on the lookout, rode down to the landing on a handsome little bronco. The islander, who had just stepped ashore, was wild with delight at the sight of a horse.

Capt. Nidever (great-uncle of Mrs. Evelyn Nidever Hildebrand of Carmel) took the woman to his home and put her in charge of his Spanish wife. The news spreading, Father Gonzales of the Santa Barbara Mission came to see her. The bereft mother, evinced the greatest fondness for the Nidever children and played with them by the hour.

A few days after her arrival, Father Antonio Jimeno sent for Indians from the Missions of San Fernando and Santa Inez, in hopes of finding someone who could converse with the Islander. But no one could understand her or make themselves understood. She learned a few Spanish words.

She was greatly disappointed when none of her kindred were found. She drooped under civilization; she missed the outdoor life of her island camp. After a few weeks she became too weak to walk. She was always patient and cheerful, looking eagerly into every face for recognition, and sometimes singing softly to herself. Mrs. Nidever prepared seal meat, and other food which she might have had on the island, in hopes that her old diet would help. She gradually became weaker and Mrs.

Nidever seeing the approach of death sent for the old priest and she was baptized.

In the walled cemetery, close to the shelter of the tower of Santa Barbara Mission, is the grave of a devoted mother, the heroine of San Nicholas.

The survivor of 18 years of solitary captivity arrived in Santa Barbara on the 8th of September, 1853. In 1880 when the story was written for Scribner's magazine, Capt. Nidever and his wife were still living. Carl Detman, or Brown as he was known by the sailors; Dr. Brinkerhoff, who attended the woman, and many others who had know her, were still alive in Santa Barbara.

Father Gonzales had died a few years before and is buried under the floor of the old chapel. The two lessees of the Peor es Nada, Isaac Sparks and Lewis L. Burton, were also residents of Santa Barbara, the former having built the first brick house there. Nidever and Brown had the islander's water-tight baskets. The mission fathers sent her feather robes to Rome. They were made of the satiny plumage of the green cormorant, the feather pointing downward, and so skillfully matched as to seem one continuous sheen of changeful luster. The record of baptism is in the church register.