

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### Long Trip to School

Youthful Californians seeking education in California before 1850 were either sent by their parents to the East Coast, a long, hard journey, or to the Sandwich Islands, another lengthy trip. In Honolulu there was a famous school known as Punahou or Oahu College, as it was once designated. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that school was celebrated in 1938.

The history of early education in California, strange as it may seem, must include the school in Honolulu, for some of the best known families in the days of the forty-niners and immediately preceding them, were sending their sons and daughters to the Islands, 2,100 miles away, for their primary and secondary education. Included in this number was the first child born of American parents in California.

Manifestly parents would not break home ties for children of tender years and send them across the waters to a foreign land unless there were strong reasons for doing so. The truth was that there were no American schools in California in 1840 to which parents, according to their own statements, could send their offspring. Striking evidence of the above fact is revealed in the famous Larkin papers, valuable treasures of the Bancroft Library of the State University.

Thomas Oliver Larkin, a native of Massachusetts, able, courageous, spiritually minded, endowed with keen business acumen, had come to Monterey in 1832 and set himself up as a merchant in the city. At that time, the Mexican era, it was the capital of California. Monterey was probably the most important coast city of its day, a port for ships and a rendezvous of traders, bustling with social activity engaged in by men and women of remarkable beauty, it attracted Larkin as an ideal place to make a home and to go into business.

Over his home presided his gracious wife, who made the Larkin house a center of hospitality as does her granddaughter, Mrs. Harry Toulmin, in this, the year of 1950. The merchant's business prospered and he was honored as a leader in community affairs.

But Mr. Larkin was disturbed in mind concerning the education of his children of whom Thomas Oliver Larkin Jr., was, according to Bancroft, born April 13, 1834, the first white child born of American parents in California.

In one of the father's earliest letters he laments the fact that Oliver, at the age of six, had learned so little English that the father could not even talk with his son as he would like to do.

Other American families in California in 1840 and in the years immediately following, were in the same predicament.

From Bancroft one learns that there had been schools held intermittently from the year 1794 under the Spanish and Mexican regimes. Most of them were of short duration and instruction was in Spanish. Ferrier in his "Ninety Years of Education in California" states that "there were only two schools in California at the time of the American occupation in 1846 and they were immediately abandoned by their teachers.

The perplexity of the problem was increased by the fact that in 1840 no railroad transportation to Eastern schools was available. Parents shrank from risking the lives of their children in the known hardships of the journey by overland trails, by water and land over the Isthmus route, or by vessel around Cape Horn.

The news began to drift in to Larkin and other parents in California, brought by sea captains plying the Honolulu-California trade routes, that good schools were available in the Islands. In 1938 there was printed a bulletin at Pomona College by Charles T. Fitts, professor of education there, in which he reviews much of the history of education in California.

(The story of Honolulu's role in educating Californians will be continued tomorrow.)

As I have read through the years the story of the history of California and of Monterey, in particular, it becomes a fascinating pastime to dig still further into the past and to accomplish the research that it takes to write the story and have it correct, for if it is not correct it loses its value and becomes an untruth. The memory of one person concerning a person or an event, must become the memories of several and the whole as it is woven together makes the story authentic and historical.

A few days ago I was told that Mr. James B. Abbe was the husband of Rowena Meeks Abdy, the artist, and now I find that not even the name is spelled the same – so I apologize to everyone concerned and to my readers.

Making that mistake gives me a chance to write that Mrs. Abdy did live in San Juan and that her husband, H.

Bennett Abdy, presented a picture of his wife and a few of her "treasures" to the History and Art Association in July of 1946. At that time he was residing in New York.