

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Off to School**

*This is a continuation of the story of the role played by Honolulu in the education of early Californians.*

The educational system in Honolulu had grown out of the similar dilemma. When the first settlers from New England came to the islands in 1820, they faced a situation which demanded that they send their children on a long voyage to New England and the East Coast or, as an alternative provide education in their new home. They chose the latter, according to Professor Fitts of Pomona College.

First they turned their attention to the adult natives, including the king and chiefs. For these they established many schools throughout the Island group. At the start, they taught their children at home. The native children were given no instruction at first, chiefly because the parents did not want their children to be able to read or write before they could. So eager were the Islanders for an education that Alexander, the historian, affirms, the fact that "before the end of 1824, 2000 people had learned to read and almost the whole population went to school" – a noteworthy achievement for a four-year period.

The Oahu Charity School, for the instruction of English-speaking boys and girls, housed in a neat brick building, was opened on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January, 1833.

By 1840, at the time when the Larkins were looking for a place to educate their eldest son, there was a very comprehensive program of education in the Islands. Boarding schools for boys and girls of high school age as well as the elementary grades, had been established in the Islands of Maui and Hawaii; there was a school for younger chiefs on Oahu, while mission schools and common schools under trained teachers, provided for the student population in all the Islands. It is said that by 1840 there were 15,000 pupils in the schools.

Thus it may seem that the sea captains had ample reason to bring word to the coast that there were good educational facilities available for California youth in the Kingdom of Hawaii.

In September, 1840 two ships set out from Monterey bearing their special cargo. In one, Captain Paty's famous bark, the Don Quixote, five or six boys, ranging in age from eight to eleven years, sons of influential

Americans and friends of the Larkin family, were quivering with the excitement of adventure. In another vessel, the Alciope, Captain Clapp, sailed Thomas O. Larkin, Jr., a lad of six years.

Both groups of boys were bound for the Honolulu home of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Johnstone, who, connected with the Oahu Charity school, were to be their teachers. The gratitude which the Monterey parents had for the educational opportunities offered their children in the Islands is evidenced by a letter sent by Mr. Larkin on the Alciope to Mr. Johnstone: "Your taking charge of the children going away from this country will be a great benefit to them and you will confer a great favor on their parents as they cannot be educated here..."

This and other Larkin letters reveal the solicitude of the parents for the welfare of their son. They made arrangements for a friend, Benjamin Parker, to make the complete journey to Honolulu with him. To Parker also was entrusted preliminary funds for the boy's schooling which Mr. Johnstone estimated would be \$125 for the full year.

Careful preparations also were made for the boy's wardrobe which seemed to be quite complete except for one article concerning which the father writes the school master: "You will have to purchase a hat for him on his arrival in Oahu. I cannot procure one here", an illuminating admission from a merchant in Monterey in 1840.

Finally, having done all he could for the physical wellbeing of his offspring, Larkin's sterling New England ancestry appears in the concluding lines of the letter which accompanies the boy: "I must now close and pray that my child may so prosper under your charge that through God's mercy he may grow up under the fear of his Maker."

The first leg of the ship's journey, as accounted by Dr. Fitts, was from Monterey to Santa Barbara, then San Pedro and other ports of call. Of the further trip on the Alciope to the Islands we know only that the journey, which, by direct route, now takes four or five days, and by air a few hours, lasted until the 7<sup>th</sup> of November – two months and three days from the time young Oliver left his Monterey home.

Oliver's instruction in English must have started immediately for in Johnstone's first letter to the parents after their son's arrival, he informs them: "Your little boy can already master the two first lessons of

Worcester's primer and very nearly the third. He began to take a greater interest in his book within a few days and is by no means backward in picking up English words.