

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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John Swan's Saga

John A. Swan, who came to Monterey in 1843 and built California's First Theatre, wrote an article describing his journey from Mazatlan, Mexico, to Monterey, which appeared in *The Pioneer*, a publication printed in San Jose, on March 30, 1878.

He begins: "On the 20th of August, 1843, I shipped on board the schooner, Soledad, with Captain Hubbard. She was at anchor in the inner harbor of Mazatlan at the time, and was bound for San Blas to fill up the balance of her cargo, and from thence to Monterey. Upper California. The Soledad was a hermaphrodite, being a brig forward and a schooner aft; built at Guayaquil; was sharp, sailed well, and was a good sea boat, but was so badly found that she had not a chance to distinguish herself in the sailing line.

"Her sails were made in Mazatlan and instead of setting like sails should do, set like bags, not being properly cut. Though vessels are always supposed to have such things, she had neither marlin-spike nor spare thimble aboard, but we used an ironbolt instead of one. She was newly coppered, but had been on the beach for a year previously and leaked like a sieve; she had neither a winch or a windlass on board, though she had bits; she had a scuttle to her forecabin, but the combings were only three inches of rough boards nailed together to cover it with; she had no bunks in the forecabin, and when it was rough at sea, the water coming on board would wash the top of the scuttle off, pour down into the forecabin, and half drown the sleeping watch below."

When the vessel was in port, Mr. Swan says they had to pump her out every four hours; at sea, in fine weather, every two hours, and in bad weather, every hour. During long spells, he related, they had to use two sea phrases, as she was parish rigged and things worked with an Irish purchase, a rope yarn over a nail. He described the schooner further as less than 100 tons burden.

The crew consisted of eight persons, according to Monterey's future citizen. Charles Hubbard, a German, was the captain; boatswain and cook were Mexicans; John Keys, an Irishman who lived many years in Santa Barbara, following his arrival in California, was steward;

Acapulco Jim, English, married in Acapulco; Jack, English; Bill, English; Tom, colored, an American.

The Soledad was under the Mexican flag, although there were but two Mexicans listed on board, but the Captain was a naturalized Mexican citizen, and married at Mazatlan. According to Swan's record the schooner had neither main-top-masts nor fore-top-gallant-mast up when he joined her, but the main-top-mast was not sent up until two days before they reached Monterey, the fore-top-gallant was sent up the day they left San Blas and it was found to fit like the sails, "that is, it did not fit at all," but he continues "of course this was the fault of the Captain and the Boatswain, who should have seen to that before we left port."

They took on most of the cargo at Mazatlan and sailed from there on the 26th about noon, took on more cargo and sailed again on the evening of the 28th for Upper California. Quoting from the writing of Jack Swan: "We made land at Point Sur, below Carmel, on the 30th of September, light winds and foggy weather. On Monday morning, October 2nd, we were a few miles to the westward of Point Pinos with light wind. Acapulco Jim had been sick about two days, and Tom about two days and about a fortnight previous to this I had cut the thumb of my right hand scraping the deck, and on the 24th of September it had begun to fester, and the vessel was standing in for the coast of California, for we stood a long way to the westward before we tacked. She steered with a tiller, and I had to take my right hand, which made my thumb worse, and I was in pain day and night and could get no sleep." All of which makes Jack Swan a real character and not just the person who built the old adobe theatre.

He relates that his first sight of the coast was a disappointment, for he had read Dana's "Two Years Before the Mast," and "instead of plains, I saw mountains. It put me in mind of the coast of Old Spain. On the morning of the 2nd, I was relieved from steering, and did not come on deck until after we anchored in Monterey harbor. When off Point Pinos, the Captain, Boatswain and the balance of the crew cleared away the starboard anchor; the weather was fair and light, the super-cargo steering the vessel. As the shank painter was short, they let it go and cockbilled the anchor, took all the turns off the stopper but one, and hauled up a range of the chain, but never bitted it. The stopper, though new in use was old for it had been lying in a warehouse in Mazatlan for some years, and had the

dry rot. While they were hauling up the rest of the chain on deck, the stopper parted and the whole of the chain, 60 fathoms, ran out of the hawser holes, as it was not fast below – so anchor and chain were both lost.”

At noon, Jack Swan continues, the schooner anchored in Monterey harbor, there being nine other vessels at anchor there. The United States Frigate Constellation had sailed the day before. According to his record he did not come ashore until the latter part of the week, to get the first feel of Monterey, which was to be his future home.

(The next column will give Jack Swan’s version of the appearance of Monterey in 1843.)