

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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How Monterey Looked in 1842

Sir George Simpson, an Englishman of the Hudson Bay Company, visited the California coast in 1842, and in 1847 published a book in London under the title: "Authentic Narrative of a Journey Around the World." Chapter twelve of the book deals almost entirely with his experiences in Monterey.

Sir George writes: "A vessel had to keep peddling from one place to another, taking her chances of bad weather and anchorage in all the ports from San Francisco to San Diego. As the hides are all green, or nearly so, each vessel has to cure them for herself; and as the upper half of the coast, owing to the rains and fogs of the northwesterners, is unsuitable, the hides have to be carried to the drier climate of the southern ports, particularly San Diego; and then the curing is a great waste of time."

Evidently Sir George was not in love with Californians or their traffic, says Mr. Bancroft in his California Pastoral.

In "Journey Around the World" Sir George writes of his voyage down the coast to Monterey:

"At three in the afternoon of the twelfth we left Yerba Buena, exchanging salutes with Captain Wilson of the Index. We passed the Presidio and fort under the influence of a strong ebb tide, which, after rounding the southern side of the entrance, rushes to the southward at the rate of six knots an hour. In every direction of the current there lay some rock, and as the wind failed us just at this point, the vessel, which no longer had any way upon her, hurried toward them like a log. The anchor was dropped with thirty fathoms of chain but dragged till we were within a few yards of the object of our fears. When at last it did hold, it was raised so as barely to touch the bottom, that by this counteracting, in some degree, the action of the tide, it might enable the ship to obey her helm. By this operation of kedging, as it is, I believe, technically termed, we steered clear of the rocks. When the wind freshened sufficiently to enable us to stand off from the shore, which was not above cable's length distance. Luckily, the rocks in question show all their dangers above water, for there is a depth of seven fathoms round each of them; so that the Calilina now lying at Yerba Buena, was lately carried in safety between them.

"During the greater part of the voyage, the appearance of the coast was very uninteresting, consisting as it did, of a chain of sandy hills covered with scanty verdure. By the morning of the fourteenth we passed the point of Santa Cruz, forming the northern extremity of the Bay of Monterey, which resembles a segment of a circle with a cord of about eighteen miles; but in consequence of the lightness of the winds, it was eight in the evening of the fifteenth before we came abreast of the castle and cast anchor, in the neighborhood of four vessels, the American barque "Fama," schooner "Julia Ann," the brig "Bolivar," and the Mexican schooner "California."

"The harbor, if harbor it can be called, is merely the southern end of the bay, protected from the west by the northerly inclination of Point Pinos. It is sheltered from only one of the prevailing winds, the southeaster of the soft winter; and so little is landlocked, that in the most favorable state of wind and weather, the whole beach presents nearly as troublesome a surf as the shore of the open ocean. Well was it described by one of the band of Franciscans, who first visited it after the days of Viscaïno, as "this terrible port of Monterey."

"Next morning at 8 o'clock, we exchanged a salute of seven guns with the castle, which was at present so flush of gunpowder as to return our compliment without borrowing from us, as it sometimes condescends to do, the needful for the purpose; and soon afterward we were boarded by six officers of the customs, who flocked down to our vessels like vultures to their prey. As they came up the side of the ship, they exhibited a superabundance of bowing and smiling; and after the ordinary ceremonials were exhausted, they were conducted into the cabin in order to proceed to business. When told that we had paid our tonnage dues at San Francisco, and had no cargo to land at Monterey, they looked like a disappointed batch of expectant delegates, leaving the table on which wine was already placed, with dry lips and lengthening faces.

"To ourselves, however, the visit was by no means unwelcome, as a necessary preliminary to our going on shore, an operation which we effected by waiting on the outer edge of the surf, till a comber, as it is technically distinguished, wafted out a boat into a little cove at the foot of the Custom House; and then one or two of the sailors jumping out, dragged her up, so that when the waves retired, we were high and dry on shore.

“Though infinitely inferior as a port to San Francisco and San Diego, yet Monterey, from its central position, has always been the seat of government. It was, however, only after the revolution of 1836, that it could be compared with the other settlements in the point of commercial importance having suddenly expanded from a few houses into a population of 700 souls.”

(To Be Continued)