

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 26, 1950

Sir George Not Impressed With Monterey in 1842

(Continued)

Sir George Simpson, a member of the firm of the Hudson Bay Company, described Monterey as he saw it in 1842, in his book "The Authentic Narrative of a Journey Around the World," published in London, England, in 1847:

"The town occupies a very pretty plain, which slopes toward the north and terminates to the southward in a tolerably lofty ridge. It is a mere collection of buildings, scattered as loosely on the surface as if they were so many bullocks at pasture; so that the most expert surveyor would not possibly classify them into even crooked streets. What a curious dictionary of circumlocutions a Monterey Directory would be! The dwellings, some of which attain the dignity of a second story, are all built of adobe; being sheltered on every side from the sun by overhanging eaves while towards the rainy quarter of the southeast they enjoy the additional protection of boughs of trees, resting like so many ladders on the roof.

"In order to resist the action of the elements, the walls as I have already mentioned with respect to the mission in San Francisco, are remarkably thick, though this peculiarity is here partly intended to guard against the shock of earthquakes, which are so frequent that 120 of them were felt during two successive months of the last summer. This average, however, of two earthquakes a day is not so frightful as it looks, the shocks being seldom severe, and often so slight, according to Basil Hall's experience in South America, as to escape the notice of the uninitiated stranger.

"Externally the habitations have a cheerless aspect in consequence of the paucity of windows, which are almost unattainable luxuries. Glass is rendered ruinously dear by the exorbitant duties, while parchment, surely a better substitute than a cubic yard of adobes, is clearly inadmissible in California on account of the trouble of its preparation and, to increase the expense, carpenters are equally extravagant and saucy, charging three dollars for such a day's work as one is likely to get from fellows that will not labor more than three days in a week. After all, perhaps the Californians do not feel the privation of

light to be an evil. While it certainly makes the rooms cooler; it cannot by any possibility interfere with the occupations of those who do nothing; and even for the purpose of ventilation, windows are hardly needed, inasmuch as the bedding, the only thing that requires fresh air, is daily exposed to the sun and wind. Among the California housewives, the bed is quite a show, enjoying as it does, the full benefit of contrast.

"While the other furniture consists of a deal table and some badly made chairs, with possibly a Dutch clock and an old looking glass, the bed ostentatiously challenges admiration with its snowy sheets fringed with lace, its pile of soft pillows covered with finest linen or richest satin, and its well arranged drapery of costly and tasteful curtains. Still, notwithstanding the washings and the airings, this bed is but a whited sepulchre, concealing in the interior a pestilential wool mattress, the impregnable stronghold of millions of las pulgas.

"As to public buildings, this capital of the province may, with a stretch of charity, be allowed to possess four. First is the church, part of which is going to decay, while another part is not yet finished; its only peculiarity is that it is built, or half built, of stone. Next comes the castle, consisting of a small house surrounded by a low wall, all of adobe.

"It commands the town and anchorage, if a garrison of five soldiers and a battery of eight or ten rusty and honey-combed guns can be said to command anything. Third in order is the guardhouse, a paltry mud hut without windows.

"Fourth and last stands the Customhouse, which is, or rather, promises to be, a small range of decent offices, for though it has been building for five years it is not yet finished.

"The neighborhood of the town is pleasantly diversified with hills, and offer abundance of timber. The soil, though light and sandy, is certainly capable of cultivation; and yet there is neither field nor garden to be seen. If one were to judge from appearances, even the trouble of fencing would exceed the light of California patience, for we here and there saw premises enclosed after a fashion by branches of trees stuck in the ground; and this miserable makeshift was the less excusable, as the adjacent pastures were inconveniently overgrown with the prickly pear, growing to a height of

12 feet, and armed with spikes too formidable for either man or beast to encounter.

“Monterey is badly supplied with water, which, in consequence of the extraordinary drought of last year, lately brought a dollar a pipe. The small stream, which runs through the town is generally dry in summer, the very season when its water is most needed.”