

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Cordua Memoirs

It is interesting to read and to know what the first settlers in California thought of the country and its people. In my research I have found an entertaining account of life in Monterey written in the memoirs of Theodor Cordua, as edited and translated by Erwin G. Gudde and published in the quarterly of the California Historical Society.

While there is no dearth of diaries and memoirs written in the hectic years following the discovery of gold, we have only a few contemporary sources which give us a glimpse of the history of California during the period preceding this event. The translator states that he was therefore pleased when he accidentally discovered the memoirs of Cordua, the first settler in the Sacramento valley north of Sutter's establishment, were still in the possession of his family in Germany. Through the kind efforts of a niece of the author, Frau Laura Cordua, he secured permission to translate and publish the manuscript.

Cordua was born on the 23rd of October 1796, on his father estate, "Wardow," near Laage in Mecklenburg. His family was probably of Spanish descent, having settled in northern Germany in the 16th or 17th century.

As a boy he dreamed of foreign travel and so at the age of 14 he became an apprentice to a retail merchant, thinking that that trade would be the most likely to offer him chances to see the world. He left Germany in 1816 and worked his way to Batavia and then to Dutch South America. He became very wealthy but lost his entire fortune in 1841. After having tried in vain to establish himself in the United States, he embarked for the Hawaiian Islands. In Honolulu he heard glowing accounts of the discovery of gold and decided to "locate in this little known region of Mexico."

In his memoirs he writes: "On the 20th of May 1842 (not 1841) I landed safely at Monterey, the residence of the Governor and the "site of" the chief custom house of Upper California. The Governor at the time was Senor Alvarado. All ships which wanted to trade in California had to anchor first at Monterey in order to pay the high duty according to the Mexican tariff. Monterey had a Catholic church and but few streets which were built up entirely. Many streets had only a few houses here and

there. There was not yet any pavement nor were there any gates. The whole place looked as if it were not yet to become a town. From a distance, however, its two-hundred white adobe houses on a gentle slope, surrounded on all sides by proud coniferous forests, made a very interesting and even surprising impression upon me, a northern European who came from the tropics. On the arrival of a ship from Boston or from the Sandwich Islands, a ball was usually arranged. All foreigners were invited, and from the surrounding country the rancheros with their families assembled. The dances were similar to ours, Cuadrillos, waltzes, and reales followed one after another. The music was primitive. A wind instrument, the tambourine, the guitar and one violin made up the orchestra."

Cordua witnessed a bear and bull fight later in Monterey and describes it as "cruel entertainment."

Before he left California in 1852 to return to Germany a poor man, having lost his fortune during the gold rush, he stated in his memoirs that he wished to list to the best of his knowledge, the animals, plants, and natural resources of the country and made a few remarks about its natives. In this list he included squirrels, kangaroo rat, gopher, mole, rabbit, beaver, opossum, and skunk, one species of land otter, in the rivers, inland swamps and lake. (Its fur worth six to eight dollars.) Two species of bear, the grizzly (which becomes six to twelve hundred pounds in weight), and the small black bear (which is found only in the higher mountains in California); raccoon, wolf and fox, elk, two species of deer, the black and red-tail (the buck of the former is larger than the common deer of Germany).

He listed a number of birds. At the time of the residence of Theodor Cordua in California there were evidently many starlings for he writes: "the latter is doing great damage to my crops, for it alights upon the newly planted fields in great numbers." Among the other common birds known today he wrote "and finally twenty-seven species of duck." Of these latter about twenty are migratory birds, which breed in the North and spend the winter in California. Among the species which stay in California is found our tame green-headed duck.

He wrote of turtles, toads, lizards and frogs, and of the various fish he had seen including sturgeon, bass, salmon, sea trout, anchovy and three species of whitefish. He listed insects, mosquitoes, flies, wasps,

ants, grasshoppers, butterflies and beetles. "The louse of the Indians differs from our louse," he said.

Among the plants names by Cordua were the pine and the fir, oaks and sycamores and many others, and then the various grasses. Minerals were listed as gold and mercury, found in large quantities, silver and lead very little, Sulphur, salt, rock salt, and iron ore.

His record of his relations with the Indians is long and interesting.

"On May (?) 1852," Cordua writes, "after a stay of ten years I left California. When my glance had fallen upon Yerba Buena for the first time there had been but six houses and ten huts, and the many bare sand hills had offered a sad sight. Now the barren hills had disappeared together with the old name of Yerba Buena. The parting glance fell upon the large and beautiful City of San Francisco, the queen of commerce of the whole western coast of America. A city of the size of Bremen, built from material and by people of all nations of the world. At points where ten years ago ships anchored there were large warehouses. This tremendous metamorphosis had taken place in hardly four years. At this moment I had a feeling as if my chest was to burst open and I had to hide in a quiet corner in order to collect myself."