

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Perilous Journey

J. Ross Brown, adventurer, world traveler, reporter of the Constitutional Convention and caricaturist, arrived in San Francisco by sea on August 5, 1849 with a commission from the United States Government to establish a string of post offices on the inland route between San Francisco and San Luis Obispo.

Upon his arrival he found to his dismay that he must travel alone that great distance and furthermore that he would have to provide his own transportation. He purchased a mule and made the hard, dangerous journey by mule power and foot power and the adventures of that trip he wrote in a diary and later had printed in magazines and at this day a small book of that trip is available to historians and collectors.

Though the trip was no spectacular success as far as fulfilling his commission was concerned, for he was successful only in establishing the post office at San Jose, it made off handsomely in exciting experiences, color and a full view of the country which was wild and largely unprotected by law enforcement. His description of the scenery along the route and his encounters with Indians, ruffians, robbers and bull fighters can scarcely be believed when one thinks of the broad highways and the many communities which now dot the road from north to south in California.

The accumulation of that journey was published in a series of articles in the old Harper's Monthly magazine in 1862 and later incorporated into his book, "Crusoe's Island," well known today to student collectors of California.

In his narrative Brown describes brushes with outlaws, a death duel he witnessed between a bull and a huge brown bear, after his mule, sensing that danger was approaching, threw him and ran away. He relates the feeling of revulsion he had when he met at San Juan a woman member of the Donner Party, who, he was told, had eaten human flesh. He pictures the deplorable conditions he found at the Missions where he stayed. He ends his narrative with a wild scene of a murder at a Spanish fandango which was concluded on a high key of double mystery.

The Arthur Lites Press of Palo Alto has reissued the account of Brown's trip in this small but elegantly

designed and printed volume. Many of the wood cuts which illustrated the Harper's articles from sketches which Brown himself made have been used with the addition of color to brighten the Lites edition. They are most amusing.

Californiana collectors will find this edition of "A Dangerous Journey" – printed separately in book form for the first time and limited to 1000 copies – a choice addition to their libraries.

Ross Brown came to Monterey to attend the Constitutional Convention in 1849, as the official shorthand reporter. The Convention ordered him paid \$10,000, for which he was to provide 1,000 copies of the debates printed in English and 250 printed in Spanish. The Convention also provided that 10,000 copies of the Constitution printed in English and 2,000 printed in Spanish should be distributed to the electorate.

There are several books written by Brown in the rare book collection at the Monterey Library and there is a picture of him among the collection of photographs of the Constitution delegates, in Colton Hall. Mrs. Hugh Comstock of Carmel is a granddaughter of J. Ross Brown.