

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Vain Search

It was the intention of Captain Hubbard to return to San Nicholas in the Santa Barbara chain of islands, immediately to see if the native woman who had jumped overboard from his vessel, to return to the island and join her child, was still alive and bring them both to California to join their fellow natives.

But the schooner had orders to go direct to Santa Barbara, to take George Nidever and a party of otter-hunters to Santa Rose Island; afterward, to carry from Monterey a cargo of timber to San Francisco. The boat was in urgent demand along the coast, and these two trips were imperative before a second visit could be made to San Nicholas. Delaying their errand of humanity and justice a few weeks, they lost it forever; for on that very trip the Peor ed Nada capsized at the entrance to the Golden Gate. The men were washed ashore in an exhausted condition, and the schooner drifted out to sea. It was reported long after, though without confirmation, to have been picked up by a Russian ship – according to the story in the Scribner's monthly of 1880.

George Nidever was the great-uncle of Mrs. Evelyn Nidever Hildebrand of Carmel. He was a native of Tennessee who came to California in 1833. In 1820 he came to California over the Sierras with the Walker party. He hunted here under the license of Captain Dana, a cousin of the author of "Two Years Before the Mast," and is said to have killed at least 200 bears. He was naturalized in 1837 and married Sinforsa Sanchez. "His Life and Adventures" is a long and most valuable narrative. In 1878, at the age of 76, he put into a target three rifle balls in succession within the space of a square inch at the distance of 60 paces. Nidever died in Santa Barbara in 1883. He had served under Stockton and had piloted the U.S. Coast Survey craft in 1850 to the Santa Barbara Islands and helped in the rescue of the woman of this tale. He raised stock for 17 years on San Miguel Island, in which he later bought an interest and afterward sold for \$10,000.

After the loss of the Monterey Schooner, there was no craft of any kind larger than canoes and fishing boats on the lower coast. No one cared to travel to the island in an open boat.

The fate of the mother and child lay heavy on the more tenderhearted of the Mission fathers, but it was not until 1850 that Father Gonzales found an emissary to search for the lost. Thomas Jeffries had come into possession of a small schooner and was offered \$200 should he find and bring the woman and child to Santa Barbara alive. Fifteen years had passed since the abandonment of the island and no one having visited the spot during that time, the probability of the death of the parties was universally accepted, although no actual proof of the death had been sought or found.

But when Thomas Jeffries' boat was seen coming up the bay without the signal he was supposed to display provided his search had been successful, the matter was settled. Jeffries had found no trace of a living being on the island.

Tom Jeffries described the island as seven miles long by three or four wide; the body of the land about 600 feet above the beach. Numbers of red foxes were seen on the hills, and droves of curious wild dogs, tall and slender, with coarse long hair and human eyes. On a flat, near the upper end of the island he had found the remains of a curious hut, made of whales' ribs planted in a circle, and so adjusted as to form the proper curve of a wigwam-shaped shelter. This he judged to have been either the residence of the chief, or a place of worship where sacrifices were offered. He picked up several ollas, or vessels of stone, and one particularly handsome cup of clouded green serpentine.

So fabulous were his yarns of the fine beds of otter and seal, that the interest of hunters was around, and early in the following year a boat was fitted out and George Nidever, accompanied by Thomas Jeffries and a crew of Indians, started again for the island, 70 miles away.

(More tomorrow)