

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Elusive Island Woman Sighted

When George Nidever and Thomas Jeffries landed on the southern end of San Nicholas island in the Santa Barbara chain, and climbed the cliffs to see where the otter lay, they had a magnificent view of the islands to the north and the east. They did not linger long on the cliff, for on one side they found the rocks swarming with seal. The otter were thick on the reefs, and a stranded whale lay in the edge of the crinkling surf.

The party remained six weeks in camp on the beach. The seal were caught asleep on the rocks, the hides were salted, dried, bundled and packed. The otter were caught, the loose hide taken from the body with one cut, turned wrong side out, stretched and dried.

Before the schooner left the vicinity of San Nicholas, a terrific storm arose, lasting eight days, carrying away a mast and dragging the anchor, so that another had to be improvised of a bag filled with stone. During the tempest, a sailor fancied he saw a human figure on the headland of the island. Through the washes of spray it seemed to be running up and down the edge of the plateau, beckoning and shouting. The captain was called, but the apparition had vanished. On the eighth day, the schooner was enabled to run over to San Miguel, and from there to Santa Barbara, where the sailor's story of the beckoning ghost of San Nicholas haunted for a long time the dreams of the superstitious on shore.

A second trip was made and still a third in July, 1853. Anchor was cast on the northeast side, and a camp was established on shore. The party consisted of Captain Nidever, a fisherman called Carl Detman, an Irish cook and a crew of Mission Indians.

The evening after their arrival, Nidever and Brown strolled several miles down the beach. As the comrades were about to retrace their steps, Nidever stopped, looked quickly about him, then stooped and closely examined something on the ground. In the weird moonlight, plainly outlined on the lonely shore, was the print of a slender, naked foot.

"The woman of San Nicholas: 'My God she is living'."

He lifted his voice, and shouted in Spanish that friends had come to rescue her. Overcome by conviction that the lost woman must have been near when he was in

camp two years before – and it was not a creation of fancy, but a living being, they had seen in the storm – the captain ran to and fro, calling, looking and swearing in turn. Hours were spent by the two men in hunting but in vain.

The next day Nidever found a basket of rushes hanging in a tree. It contained bone-needles, thread made of sinews, shell fishhooks, ornaments, and a partially completed robe of birds' plumage, made of small squares nearly matched and sewed together. Nidever proposed replacing the things, but Brown scattered them about, saying that, if they were picked up, it would be proof that the owner had visited the spot. Inland they discovered several circular, roofless enclosures made of woven brush. Near these shelters were poles with dried meat hanging from elevated cross-pieces. The grass was growing in the pens, and nothing indicated their recent habitation.

After several days, the men abandoned the search. There was no doubt that some one had been on the island very lately. Either the woman, or the child grown to womanhood, had lived there, or, perhaps, both mother and child had survived until recently. But, they concluded, they must have been dead months at least. The footprints were older than they had at first supposed. The robe had not been replaced in the tree.

After that the fishing went on for weeks, and they were about to return home, but Nidever said he believed a person was hiding on the island. If she was living he was bound to find her. The old captain was firm; suitable preparation was made, and the entire force started on their final hunt for a ghost. Near the head of the island they came upon the bone house Jeffries had described. An olla and old basket were near the door. It stood amidst untrampled grass.

After several days' tramp, a dangerous climb over slippery rocks brought Brown to a spot where there were fresh footprints. He followed them up the cliffs until they were lost in the thick moss. Walking further, he found a piece of driftwood, from which he concluded the person had been to the beach for firewood and dropped a piece. From a high point on the ridge he could see the hunters below. Then his eye caught a small object a long way off on the hills. Advancing toward it, he was dumbfounded to find it was the head of a woman, barely visible above the low woven-brush sides of her roofless retreat in the bushes. (More on Monday)