

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Early Day Trade in Monterey

Reading in Bancroft's "California Pastoral" recently, I came across a "specimen of commercial correspondence" of the early 1840 period which I thought interesting. The letter was written by H. Mellus to Mr. James Watson in Monterey. It is dated October 8, 1845, and reads:

"Dear Sir – I wish you would purchase for me, payable next season or in the spring, three bales of sugar, of Malarin, if he will let you have it, at six dollars the arroba. And if not, see if Don Manuel Diaz will let you have it at that price or less. Get two bales at any price you can, if you cannot get it at the price named, and deliver one to the Advance when she arrives in Monterey and send the other one or two, as may be, to San Francisco, in California. I want it for immediate ship's use, as I am borrowing sugar here for daily use."

"Yours truly, H. Mellus."

James Watson, often known as "Santiago," ran away from his home in England while he was very young. As a member of a crew of an English whaling vessel he came to California as early as 1824 and when anchor was cast at Santa Barbara he left the ship and walked over the mountains to Monterey. From that time until his death nearly 40 years later he was intimately connected with the commercial, civic and educational enterprises for the development of this locality. He was particularly interested in the business of buying and selling hides and tallow.

Mellus & Howard was an important firm in San Francisco, with which Larkin, Green and many others in Monterey did business.

In 1842 common calico paid a duty of one-eighth of a dollar a vara. A vara is 33 inches in length. The term is usually used in reference to land measurements in California. I read in an article a few days ago that the Mexicans sometimes employed methods of measurement which in these days of hair-splitting precision possess a certain charming relaxation.

In marking off a large piece of land they frequently tied one end of a lariat to a vaquero's saddle, and the other end to another vaquero's saddle. The first man would ride ahead along the line of measurement until the lariat was taut. Then the second man would come up

from behind and advance until it stretched tight again, and so on, until the measurement was completed.

The story went on to say that it was generally the custom to keep track of the number of lariat lengths by putting a pebble in the pocket for each length marked off.

The vara, it is said, was originally known in Mexican antiquity, as "Solomon's pace." Under this early system there were 1,000 paces of Solomon to a mile, and three miles to a league. This eventually became the vara and was stabilized at 33 inches. In Texas the vara is 33.33 inches.

Governor Micheltorena passed a decree on hides the 31st of December, 1843. At every port an "agente de policia" was to be appointed by the local authorities, who should inspect all hides exported in national vessels. No hide should be shipped without being examined and marked by this agente. Hides not bearing the owner's brand and sale-mark should be confiscated, and the buyer, or person in whose hands they were found, should be fined \$5 for each hide. Every four months the agente should report to the local authorities for publication the number of hides exported, with a statement of their marks of ownership.

Larkin wrote on January 4, 1846. "Monterey is the only port in this department where foreign vessels can enter to pay their duties. The rule of the Monterey Custom House is to demand the duties in cash and hides ... By long custom, whale ships are allowed to enter Monterey and San Francisco on paying from \$10 to \$20 port charges, and a certain percentage on such matters as they may barter for supplies."

Before 1845, according to Bancroft, considerable fur was exported – prime sea otter skins for the Canton market being worth in Monterey as high as \$40 each; there was still some fur and gold shipped. Shingles, lumber, spars, and horses were shipped to the Sandwich Islands; beef, fat, wheat and beans to the Russian settlements on the northwest coast, in exchange for drafts on St. Petersburg, Russia.