

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

January 8, 1951

### **George Nidever And 'Brown Eyes'**

It was a rare privilege which I enjoyed during the recent holidays when I sat for a few hours listening to the true life story of George Nidever, at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Evelyn Nidever Hildebrand, in Carmel. Mr. Nidever was born in Santa Barbara in 1863, but he certainly does not appear as an 87-year-old man. His memory is excellent and the incidents in his life which began at a very early age, are told in a quick and fascinating manner.

The subject of this sketch today is the fourth George Nidever. He is the nephew of George Nidever, a pioneer of California from the year 1802. The latter was a member of a Hudson's Bay Company group of trappers who came overland hunting for fur-bearing animals. When the party arrived near the coast and could see the Pacific Ocean from the mountains above Ventura, they thought they were seeing a big river and that the Santa Barbara chain of Islands was the land on the other side. It was this uncle of George Nidever who rescued the Indian woman from Santa Barbara Islands after she had spent 18 years alone. He took her to his home in Santa Barbara and there she lived until she passed away in 1853.

The third George Nidever, the father of the holiday visitor to the Peninsula, was an early settler in Santa Barbara, probably drawn there through the interests of his uncle. He became the owner of a 3500-acre ranch in that part of California. Tragedy overtook him and he died of gunshot wounds a month before his son was born.

When George Nidever the fourth was a few years old, he and his mother left Santa Barbara and settled in San Juan Bautista, where Mrs. Nidever owned property. He interrupted the family history at this point to tell us a story of the early days in San Juan. He had played "hookey" from school, as all the boys have done down through the years, and wandered to the race track, about a mile or so from town. Here he became acquainted with a group of men who were betting on the horses. They offered him a commission if he would act as go-between and place their bets for them. When the races were over, this boy of less than six years was \$250 richer. In those days in San Juan it was hardly safe for anyone to have that much money on his person, let

alone a small, unprotected boy, so the gamblers took him in charge and sent him back to his mother in the boot of the stage. Although she was angry with her small son for his failure to attend school that day, and because of his association with the class of men who would place bets on horses, she was very glad to have the \$250, Mr. Nidever remembers. At about the same time this same young man met Brigham Young and recalls with pleasure setting on his lap while he told him hair-raising stories of the early days in Utah. He also enjoyed the friendship of Buffalo Bill Cody, who became his boyhood hero.

When young Nidever was 17 he was made the leader of 26 horses, 16 men and a few swampers and guards engaged in hauling food and supplies for the workers on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad. They would make a haul from 25 to 35 miles each way through dangerous country, populated by Indians and wild animals to such an extent that guards were kept constantly on the watch.

During this period of Nidever's life he fell in love. He walked away from the camp one day, armed with a gun and on search for deer meat for food for the men. He had wounded his prey and chased it into a bit of woods and out into a clearing, when an Indian confronted him, and inquired what he was doing and where he came from. Nidever replied that he had just wounded a deer and was chasing it and that he was from California. The magic word California softened the heart of the Indian. Had he said he was from Utah or even Colorado, something very different might have happened to him, according to Mr. Nidever, for at that time the Indians did not like the Americans from those states.

The Indian told him to leave by a certain trail and there he would be met by another Indian. He did this and the second Indian took him into the Indian camp. This camp was occupied only by a few young men who had been left to guard the women, children and old men, while the other young ones were off on the warpath. Nidever was taken into the teepee of the chief, treated to dinner and introduced to the family. A daughter, whose Indian name was Brown Eyes, was very beautiful and very intelligent and Mr. Nidever, by his own admission, fell in love with her. She was not an Indian but had been raised by the chief and his wife, who had sent her to a girl's school in Cincinnati. After he had called many times and had sent at least two tons of provisions to the camp when he discovered that they were short of food,

Nidever tells the story of the end of his romance with the Indian maiden. The chief told him he would gladly allow the marriage if he would promise to remain with the Indians until he was 21 years of age. If they would wait to be married until he reached that age, then he could take her any place he desired. He also promised that when the marriage had taken place he would produce papers to prove her true identity.

Nidever was obliged to accompany his men and horses, but he planned to return to claim his bride. To this day he remembers with sorrow and regret that his family told him that Brown Eyes had died and also told the Indian maiden that her lover had passed away. It was many years afterward that he learned the truth too late.

For seven years Mr. Nidever was the bodyguard of Henry Miller, the California cattle king and for two years he was that noted man's general foreman of the San Joaquin valley ranches. His experiences during that period of his life is another story.

Mr. Nidever has returned to Compton where he makes his home with another daughter, Mrs. Charles Hall, when he is not with the Hildebrand family in Carmel.