

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Mystery Ship Arrives

We may be sure that the arrival of the first foreign vessel at Monterey was an event. It was in 1817 and where the Custom House Reservation is now was probably the setting for the gathering of citizens, the commandante of the military post, Don Jose Maria Estudillo, and the governor, Don Vicente Pablo de Sola. It arrived on a soft spring morning, while a gentle breeze was blowing in from the northwest. The lookout stationed at Punta de Pinos came rushing in on horseback through the Presidio gate and made straight for the commandante's house.

Hubert Howe Bancroft in his "California Pastoral" makes an exciting story of the event. "What is the matter?" Bancroft quotes Don Jose as asking of the lookout as he came to the door. "A sail! A strange sail far out at sea; it is very far out, but it seems to have the intention of coming here," replied the lookout.

"Ho, there! My glass and trumpet," the commander shouted; "and bring my coat, the best one of the gold braid; and don't forget my boots and hat. Where is my sword? And hunt me up that chart of the flags of all nations."

Arrayed in his most imposing habiliments, we suppose, the commander was ready to meet the enemy.

"Now sound the drum!" he cried, according to Bancroft, "and let the infantry and artillery appear; let all who love their country join with me in her defense, prepared to shed our last drop of blood for God and the King!"

The drummers rushed forth, beating for dear life round the plaza, (where the Standard Oil Station is now) while the troops mounted their horses and the artillerymen and militia repaired to the fort. The women made everything ready for flight, and the old men and boys got out their swords and forelocks, and scoured from them the rust. At the fort, according to history, the men heated some balls red hot, so as to do the fullest execution upon the ship.

We suppose they wondered, "Is it a pirate? Or a Frenchman, or a Yankee?" It did not matter; it was all one; it should see, whatever it was, that the country was not to be easily wrested from its noble and brave defenders.

Slowly and surely as an impending fate, the vessel approached the harbor, until distinctness marked its every outline, and the ever-broadening sails were loosened and allowed to flap in the wind.

The commander planted himself at the foot of the fort, probably near where the Custom House was built about 10 years later. He clutched his big trumpet nervously, writes Bancroft, and gazed at frequent intervals through his glass, and studied attentively his flag pictures. Life was sweet, but his mind was made up. Life without honor was valueless; and better eyes dim in death than awake to see California sons slain.

By and by, after faithful study, applying to the matter to the fullest extent the exercise of his astute intellect, the commander pronounced the strange sail a schooner of 80 to 100 tons burden, but of what nation it was impossible to determine. The streaked and starred bunting flying at the masthead was not on his chart of flags of all nations, which was fully 50 years old. It was evidently a private signal, and there was not a reasonable doubt of its being that of a corsair, the red streaks signifying rivers of blood, and the stars the number of cities taken, writes Bancroft. The commander thought he could discern warlike preparation on board; nevertheless, he would play on her at once his old successful tactics, and raise a white flag. If he could thus, we suppose, lure the enemy into his power, he might yet save the commonwealth. Presently the gallant commandante placed his trumpet to his lips and bellowed:

"Que Buque?"

"No Sabe Espanol," was the reply which came back across the water as from another world.

"Ship ahoy! Que bandera!" bravely persisted Don Jose, determined to know the truth, however unpalatable.

"Americana!" came from the schooner.

(More Tomorrow)