

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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An Abundance of Fruit

In the June 16, 1885, issue of The Monterey Sentinel I have discovered that the first planting of alfalfa in California was made by David Spence in the lots beside his home in 1841. At that date Spence was living on Alvarado street, so the planting was probably made facing Calle Principal. His neighbors, all living in adobe houses, were Pedro Narvaez and Juan Bautista Alvarado.

All the agricultural authorities give the date of the first plantings of alfalfa in the state as between 1851 and 1854, but no one seemed to know the exact place or by whom planted. Authorities say that the seed came from Chile whereas, according to the early Monterey Sentinel it came from Peru, which was Spence's home before he came to Monterey.

"Mr. David Spence has had the latter variety of grass growing in his garden at Monterey for the last 14 years," according to the item in the 1855 Sentinel. "The seed of it was originally procured from Peru by a California vessel trading in the old times along that coast."

"At Monterey, which has a rich, dry soil, the Peruvian alfalfa grows to a height of three feet. The foot is of the size of a pipe-stem and about six inches long. The stem is round and of the thickness of the roots, the stemlets occur three inches apart, on which the leaves grow, three on a branchlet. They are long and obtuse, spear-shaped and an inch in length. The flowers are small, of a purplish pink, and continued in a cone-form bunch at the top of the stalk. It flowers in March and April, but then may be sparsely seen in any month of the year. The plant continues green at all times, in the tropical elevated lands, and that is its habit in Monterey.... It is found to pay better even than copper, silver or gold mining, as the old Spaniards say."

In the next issue of the Monterey weekly there appeared this bit of news: "A gentleman of Monterey, who lived in San Diego County in 1851, informed us that he has seen alfalfa six feet high, and the stem the thickness of an ordinary walking stick. Stock do not prefer it, if they can get other kind of grass."

A few weeks later David Spence's garden was again the cause for comment by the editor when he noted:

"David Spence Esq., of this place, had handed us a few large and more excellent pears taken from his fine garden in this town. The idea which has prevailed that such fruits cannot be most successfully grown immediately on the seashore, is thus completely confuted, and there is no excuse for not having an abundance of **(fruit)**."

It will be interesting to learn a bit of the background of this early Monterey resident who took such an interest in the agricultural development of this region. "Spence is inseparably associated with the early history of Monterey County, with the reclamation of enormous tracts of land, political offices of great importance, and business enterprises at once substantial and developing," according to Guinn's History of California.

Spence was born in Scotland and became secretary of John Beggs & Co., hide and tallow merchants of London. He was sent with W.E.P. Hartnell, a native of England, first to Peru, then two years later to Monterey in 1824. He served as alcalde under Governor Arguello. He took up two grants of land, the first, called Buena Esperanza, in the Salinas Valley. (12,000 acres), and the second, the Llano Buenavista, also in the Salinas Valley, which included the present site of the Spreckels Sugar Company factory and the town of Spreckels.

Spence died in 1875 at the age of 75. He married Adelaide Estrada, daughter of Mariano and Isabel Estrada, natives of Monterey.