

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Even Before Gold**

The oldest historical society is the Society of California Pioneers. On August 23, 1850, the steamer California arrived with the news of President Zachary Taylor's death. A parade was sponsored in his memory, and in it, in a body, marched a group of men who had reached California prior to the discovery of gold.

A few days later these same men decided to form an organization of the Society of California Pioneers. On the anniversary in 1951 of the first meeting, the members met to place a plaque on a building at the southwest corner of Montgomery and Clay streets in San Francisco, in honor and in memory of those California pioneers.

Women also played a part in the organization. We have been handed a letter written on May 15, 1890, and published in the San Jose Weekly Mercury. The author was Mrs. F. Grayson-Crane of St. Helena.

The letter is headed: "The Presentation of a Flag," purchased by Ladies Who Came Here Prior to 1849 – An Address and Oration in Response."

The letter was written after a visit to San Jose where the writer went to pay the last tribute of respect to a valued friend, Mrs. Branham, when she was reminded, she wrote, how rapidly the pioneers were joining the majority on the other side. "What a train of reflections did it bring to my mind."

Among the incidents that the occasion vividly recalled to Mrs. Crane, and which she thought should be preserved historically was the origin and presentation of the flag now used by the Pioneers of San Francisco. Mrs. Branham had been a subscriber to the fund for its purchase and the ceremony of presentation to the Pioneers was by her daughter, then a lovely young school girl of fifteen. Miss Elizabeth Ogler, for many years a member of the faculty of the Pacific Grove high school and now a resident of Palo Alto, is a descendant of this same young girl.

As Mrs. Crane was preparing the list for subscriptions, a lady friend of 1852 called and remarked: "By the Bye, that reminds me that our mutual friend Mrs. --- says that there were no ladies in California 'til she arrived in 1849."

Of course, it was only necessary for Mrs. Crane to take that for her text, she wrote, to insure a liberal subscription from the ladies who came west prior to '49. The amount (\$350) was soon subscribed, and then came the question for the women to decide, who should present the flag?

The question was soon settled that a pioneer of pioneers of '49 was certainly entitled to the distinction and the honor went to Miss Elizabeth Branham of San Jose who, when a child, crossed the plains in 1846 with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Branham. Descendants of this family are still residents of the Santa Clara Valley.

Mrs. Branham, with charming naivete, declaimed the address prepared for the occasion by A.J. Grayson, who had been, with his wife and child, a member of the Branham party in their trek to California. With the artlessness of a child, it is told, she placed the flag in the hands of Samuel Brannan, the then president of the Society of California Pioneers, who received it with a most grateful acknowledgement.

This was a memorable celebration of Admission Day, September 9, 1853. Mrs. Crane sent a copy of Elizabeth Branham's address to the Weekly Mercury to be published and we republish it in the Diary:

"Mr. President and Members of the Pioneer Association: Before you enter upon the ceremonies which you have devised to commemorate the day which welcomed our state into the Union, the ladies of your families desire to pay some tribute to the sagacity, enterprise and love of independence which have led to your organization under the proud title of 'Pioneers of California.' They recollect with sympathy your toilsome marches across the dreary plains and rugged mountains, your tedious voyage around Cape Horn, and perilous transit across the unhealthy Isthmus. They acknowledge with pride as the result of these toils and hardships, the foundation of our new state, already rivaling her elder sisters in the worth and intelligence of her citizens, the magnificence of her cities, the fertility of her farms, and the comforts of her domestic firesides."

(More on Monday)