

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### Scraps of Curious History

As we read through the first volume of the Sentinel, published in Monterey from June 1, 1855 to June 1, 1856, we discovered that most of the articles dealing with agriculture must have been contributed by Dr. Alexander S. Taylor, a druggist of Monterey. On June 2, 1855, the editor wrote: "Curiosities – There is not a harder worker to be found than our townsman Dr. Taylor on Alvarado street, and while laboring for the present and practical purposes, he delights frequently to turn off to the fields of deep research and antiquity, and many a scrap of curious history, and many a relic has he rescued from oblivion."

In Susanna Bryant Dakin's "Lives of William Hartnell," Taylor is mentioned as a newcomer. On June 24, 1849, when a statement of intent was filed in Monterey by two old friends, Hartnell and Alvarado, and Taylor, to form the "Alisal Silver Mining Company for the purpose of working and extracting the ores of silver and other metals on the Ranchos of Alisal and Patrocinio." The author remarks that had Taylor lived in the Middle Ages, he would have been an alchemist, so pseudo-scientific seems his interest in metals.

Walter Colton also mentions Taylor in his "Three Years in California," recalling the pleasure of meeting him here with Gov. Mason, Capt. Sherman and Dr. Ord, and being invited to share their camp.

Taylor probably wrote this item: "California Century Plant – Agave Americana: A specimen of this beautiful and singular plant is now to be seen in bloom on the premises of Dona Catalina Munras, in this town. It was planted over 25 years ago by Don Esteban, and has only this spring put forth its stem, which has grown in the space of six weeks to 30 feet in height – the base of the stem is 7 inches in diameter. At the top of the stem the flowers are now coming out in great profusion and are of a pure white color."

This bit of history was written on June 16, 1855. The setting for this unusual display of floral beauty was in the garden of what is now Casa Munras. Dona Catalina Munras was the great-grandmother of Miss Maria Antonia Field, who now resides in her home on the Laguna Seca Rancho on the Monterey-Salinas road, which was granted to Catalina M. de Munras in 1834

and confirmed by the United States in 1865. The original grant was for 2,179 acres.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, Taylor reported that: "The olive also grew remarkably well in the times of the old priests. At Carmelo Mission," he wrote, "there is still a tree in full bearing (1855) and in excellent condition."

In another item there appeared this news: "William Lobb, an English botanist, who has traveled up and down California, informs us that between the town of Monterey and around Point Pinos to Carmelo Valley, there are not less than 300 distinct species of plants indigenous to the soil."

The State Agricultural Society made the announcement of the California State Fair "to be holden at Sacramento in September of 1855," in an early issue of the Monterey Sentinel. Checking with the office at the Monterey County Fairgrounds we find in the annual catalog of exhibits that the first fair at the state capital was held in 1854, just one year before the announcement quoted above. In that year the land and its care and produce were also judged and awarded prize money. Each entry was compelled to have two judges look over the land and then send in samples of the crop to the fair.

Among the entries listed were best five acres of potatoes, \$50; best half acre of sweet potatoes, \$25; best five acres of onions, \$30; best 25 pounds of butter, \$25; best 100 pounds of cheese, \$25; best specimen of tobacco, \$20; best 100 pounds of flour, \$30; best buckwheat, \$20; and best corn meal, \$15. There was a \$10 prize for the best six watermelons. Flowers received special attention and the best wax works received a \$15 award.