

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

February 7, 1951

Needles and Thread And Buckskin Breeches

Soon after Mr. W.L. Williams' arrival in Panama, after his long trip from New York to Chagres and across the Isthmus, he again encountered his traveling companion, Mr. Purdy, and they compared notes. Purdy was not satisfied with the French hotel at which he was stopping so joined Williams and two other men all on their way California, occupying the fourth corner in a bare room with only the floor boards for beds.

Mr. Williams writes in his diary: "He said his object in coming was to buy from me the buckskin breeches which I had thrown down when taken off, crusted with dried mud and stiff with the wetting they had received crossing the Isthmus. I told him to take them, but he would not without paying me something for them. I had borrowed from him a gold pen with which to write my letter home and finally I kept the pen and he took the breeches"

More than 20 years after the two men met in Santa Cruz and had a long chat. Among other things William asked was if he had brought the breeches with him. The purchaser replied that he had not, for he had heard in Panama that buckskin bags in which gold dust was carried were very scarce and high in price in San Francisco, so after he had gotten the breeches from Williams he had procured silk thread and needles, and on his way up the coast he had cut up the breeches and made bags, and upon his arrival in San Francisco sold the lot for six hundred dollars.

Williams writes: "I have no doubt his story was true, for I paid in 1850 for one small bag, sixteen dollars.

On December 5, 1849, Williams proceeded on board the steamer "California" bound for Monterey which was his destination. The steamer he describes as a side wheel boat, one of the Howland and Aspinwall line of New York. There were two steamers, the "California" and the "Pacific," subsidized by the American government to convey the mail from Panama to San Francisco, touching at San Blas, Acapulco, Mazatlan, San Diego, and Monterey. The "California" brought Monterey's first U.S. postmaster, Captain William Marcy to Monterey, on Feb. 23, 1849. The steamer, by the terms of the subsidy, had for captain an officer of the

American navy and her speed was limited to eight miles an hour; such were the terms, writes Mr. Williams.

Of all the passengers on the California Mr. Williams recalled in his diary the one man who stood out in his memory was J. B. Forbes, the purser, with whom he spent many hours playing chess. Forbes became manager of a life insurance company in San Francisco.

As the California neared San Diego Mr. Williams reported that he saw his first canoe. The beach had upon it an old hide house and all appeared to be just as described in Dana's "Two Years before the Mast." There were congregated about ten or a dozen, Americans with their horses, clamorous and eager to get abroad to go to San Francisco. They were informed that orders were that no one was to be taken on. The countenances of the group fell at his, Williams remembered. They told how they had come that far from a port in Texas, on horseback expecting to pursue their journey on the steamer, had waited two weeks for the arrival, had endured many hardships and privations which their tattered clothes, their sallow and care-worn faces, the ribs of their horses, plainly showed and they still had many miles to go to complete their journey. Some of them wept while telling their tale of woe, according to our narrator.

At this point in the diary Williams tells an exciting tale of helping a friend in need. As he stood listening to the story of the gold seekers on shore at San Diego, one man approached him and called him by name and added "I used to pass the house on Third Avenue in New York where you lived, every day, and have seen you hundreds of times. I am Gildersleeve, the footrunner." He had been a noted runner of aces, had defeated everybody in America and had done the same in England. Williams pointed out the canoe to him, gave him his ticket to present to the officer at the gangplank and as the tears rolled down his cheeks he expressed his thanks and departed. Williams saw the canoe return and knew the plan had been successful.

(More Tomorrow)