

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Piece of Polished Wood From Napoleon's 'Natalia'

Was the "Natalia" a British ship or a French vessel? Was it the ship which carried Napoleon to his exile at St. Helena or the ship on which he escaped? Was that ship wrecked at Monterey? These are all questions which have been frequently asked by residents and tourists alike.

We have found among some old newspaper clippings, loaned to us by Mrs. Millie Birks, an account of a swimming exploit by Frank E. Mauk 71 years ago, during which he "came into possession of a rib from the vessel in which Napoleon escaped from exile on the Island of Elba". When Mr. Mauk told the story in 1933 in San Jose, he was 86 years of age.

At that time a story was being told in the San Francisco papers concerning a ship's figurehead which antiquarians sought to identify as having once adorned the prow of a British frigate "Natalie," which they thought bore Napoleon to exile and death on the Island of St. Helena.

Mr. Mauk declared at that time that he did not know whether the figurehead was actually from the vessel or not, but he did know that the vessel was not the "Natalie" but "Natalia" and that it was a French vessel and not a British vessel. It was not the ship which carried Napoleon to St. Helena but the ship in which he escaped from the Island of Elba for the mad hundred days military adventure which ended at Waterloo and his permanent banishment.

Displaying a piece of wood, polished to brown, almost black, Mr. Mauk told the reporter how he acquired this piece of wood from the Natalia

"I'll tell you how I got this. I was sent to Monterey in 1879 to take charge of the Southern Pacific Railroad Station there. There was a whaling station in Monterey then and Jose Pedro in charge of the station pointed out to me the wreck of the "Natalia" partly submerged lying some 60 yards offshore. From him and others in Monterey I learned that it had been wrecked almost a half century before. The story was that it was in charge of Captain Ruurds, its hold loaded with wheat. The captain and his crew left the vessel to attend a ball in Monterey, leaving the ship in charge of a watchman.

"During the night a 'norther' came up, pulled the ship from its anchor, and washed it aground, wrecked and a total loss. Captain Ruurds never returned to face the owners but stayed in Monterey. Thereafter he was known as Captain 'Trigo', Spanish for wheat. The vessel, all accounts agreed, was that in which Napoleon escaped from Elba in 1815."

Mr. Mauk determined to have a piece of the wreckage, and so, one fine day in the fall of 1880, he put on a bathing suit, hung a coil of rope over his shoulders, and swam out the 40 or 50 feet. He described how he tied the rope to one of the ribs of the old hulk, and jerked and hauled until a piece some 10 or 12 feet long broke free.

As he struggled up the beach with his prize, who should be encountered but A.C. Bassett, then superintendent of the Southern Pacific, who had just arrived in his private car. After inquiring what he had, Bassett asked, "Do you care much for it, Frank?" After all it was his bread and butter he was talking to, he said and so he answered "I don't know that I do". So he listened while Bassett ordered the section hands to put the piece of water-soaked wood in the private car.

Some time later a baggageman by the name of "Pat," handed Mauk a package and told him it was something from Mr. Bassett. It was the piece of polished wood he has since treasured for 53 years.

(More on Monday)