

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 19, 1951

With Due Honors to All

Four years before the Royal Presidio was built, Governor Fages and Dona Eulatia, his wife, gave a ball in honor of the great French scientist, M. La Perouse. It was the first reception to a foreign visitor ever held in California. Jean Francois de Galaup de la Perouse had cast anchor in Monterey Bay on September 14, 1786 – 175 years ago.

Perouse had been sent out by the French government to make scientific explorations in remote parts of the globe. The expedition sailed from Brest in August of 1785. After doubling Cape Horn, Le Perouse explored the western coast of North America as far north as 60 degrees off the coast of Alaska, opposite Mt. St. Elias where he landed on June 23, 1786. After meeting severe storms there the expedition turned southward and 69 days later he landed at Monterey.

One of the reasons for the sending out of the expedition had been orders from the king to study and report on the exact conditions in these newest colonies of Spain. How well Governor Fages succeeded in making the scientists' stay pleasant is best told in La Perouse's own words:

"Cattle, garden stuff and milk were sent aboard in abundance. The desire of serving us seemed even to disturb the harmony between the commander of the two vessels (government frigates) and Governor Fages. Each was desirous of providing exclusively for our wants and when the amount was to be discharged, we were obliged to insist on their receiving our money.

"The garden stuff, milk and poultry and the assistance of the garrison in wooding and watering were offered free. The cattle, sheep and corn were charged at so low a rate that it was evident an account had been presented to us merely because we had insisted upon it.

"Now as to the place itself. Monterey Bay, formed from New Year's Point to the north and Point Cypress to the south presents an opening of eight leagues in this direction and nearly six in depth. To the east the land is low and sandy. The sea rolls to the foot of the sandy downs which border the coast and produces a noise which we heard when more than a league distance. The lands to the north and south of this bay are elevated and covered with trees.

"The Spanish vessels which make a long stay at Monterey usually come within six fathoms of the shore and anchor in the sand. There are many whales. The sea is covered with pelicans."

On Sunday, September 15, 1947, M. Andre Rousselet, vice consul of the Republic of France at San Francisco came to the Peninsula and unveiled a plaque commemorating the visit here, September 14, 1786 of "Jean Francois Galaup, Comte de La Perouse" placed in the garden at Carmel Mission. The plaque was a gift from the French government.

Luncheon followed the solemn high mass and the unveiling. Casa Munras in Monterey was the gathering place for the 35 French-American organization members of San Francisco and Oakland, as well as members of the California Historical Society who were the co-sponsors with the French government at the ceremonies.

At the conclusion of the luncheon, M. Rousselet presented bronze medals cast in France at the same time as the plaque to the officials at the speakers' table. Carmel Martin received the medal for Monterey, which should now be on display possibly in Colton Hall in charge of the Museum Board.

Another honor to La Perouse on the Monterey Peninsula took place in Pacific Grove at the 10th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Pacific Grove Museum. On that date, December 3, 1909, a stone was placed at the foot of a tree in the grounds, naming it "La Perouse Cypress."

La Perouse and his staff of scientists made careful observations of the geographical, biological and other scientific facts concerning the region. His journal was sent back to France, together with various collections, including seeds, dried plants and shells from Monterey Bay region.

The last letter from the ill-fated commander was dated February 7, 1788 from Botany Bay, near Sidney, Australia. Sailing from that port no more was heard from the expedition until 1826 when it was learned by the English Captain Dillon, that the vessel had been wrecked in a storm on a coral reef off Vanikora, an island lying north of the New Hebrides, and all on board were lost in 1788. In 1798 a few relics of the party were found there.