

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

January 23, 1952

### **The High Cost of Sea Otters**

Captain F.W. Beechey wrote in his "Narrative, a Voyage to the Pacific and Bering's Straits" in 1826: "The more we become acquainted with the beautiful country of California, the more we are convinced that it possessed every requisite to render it a valuable appendage to Mexico; and it was impossible to resist joining in the remark of Vancouver, "Why such an extent of territory should have been subjugated and, after the expenses and labor bestowed upon its colonization, turned to no account whatever, is a mystery in the science of state policy not easily explained."

Captain George Vancouver, distinguished English explorer, commanding the sloop-of-war Discovery arrived at San Francisco, on the first of three visits to California. He stayed in San Francisco three days in November of 1792, then proceeded to Monterey, where he remained until January 14, 1793. He came again for a second visit in October, 1793 and remained for five days then proceeding down the coast. On a third visit he was in Monterey on November 6, 1794. Like La Perouse, he wrote extensively of California in his "A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World" published in London in 1798.

Beechey observed that no fault can be found with the climate of California, its soil was fertile, it possesses forests of oak and pine convenient for building and that this contributed to the necessities of the vessels; the plains were overrun with cattle, there were excellent ports, and navigable rivers to facilitate inland communications. "Indeed," he wrote, "it struck us as lamentable that to such an extent of habitable country lying almost desolate and useless to mankind, whilst other nations are groaning under the burden of their population."

I thought it was interesting to observe from the "Narrative" that in 1826 Russia was not only active in California but was a worry to the English. Beechey relates in his writings of that date: "It is evident from the rapidity with which observation has recently been extended to the hitherto most obscure parts of the globe, that this indifference cannot continue; for whither it must disappear under the present authorities, or the country will fall into other hands, as from its situation with regard to other powers upon the

continent, and to the commerce of the Pacific, it is of too much importance to be permitted to remain long in its present neglected state.

"Already the Russians encroached upon the territory by possessing themselves of the Farallones, and some islands off Santa Barbara; and their own settlement of Bodega, is so near upon the boundary as to be the cause of much jealous feeling; not without reason it would appear, as I am informed it is well fortified, and presents to California an example of what may be effected upon her shores in a short time by industry."

A bit further in the "Narrative" Beechey wrote: "The trade in Upper California at present consists in the exportation of hides, tallow, manteca, horses to the Sandwich Islands, grain for the Russian establishments at Sitka and Kodiak, and in the disposal of provisions to whaleships and other vessels which touch upon the coast, - perhaps a few furs and dollars are sent to China.

"The importations are dry goods, furniture, wearing apparel, agricultural implements, deal-boards, and salt; and silks and fireworks from China for the decorations of the churches and celebrations of the saints' days. Almost all these articles bore high prices: the former in consequence of the increased demand for them; and the latter, partly from the necessity of meeting the expenses of the purchase of a return cargo, and partly on account of the navigation act."

Sea otter has now almost disappeared from the western coast except for the few herds which are protected by the Fish and Game Commission. In 1826 Captain Beechey, in his explanation of the high cost of exports and imports in California, wrote: "For example, the Californians living upon the sea coast and amongst forests of pine, yet are suffering themselves to buy salt and deal-boards at exorbitant prices. With a similar disregard for their interests, they are purchasing sea otter skins at 20 dollars apiece, whilst the animals were swimming about unmolested in their own harbors; and this from the Russians who are intruders upon their coast, and are depriving them of a lucrative trade: and again, they were paying 200 dollars for carts of inferior workmanship, which, with the exception of the wheels, might have been equally well manufactured in their own country."