

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **An Old Indian Duck Decoy**

When Captain F.W. Beechey of England wrote his diary in 1825, titled "A Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific ad Bering's Strait," he was enthusiastic about Monterey which he visited three times between 1823 and 1828. He was in command of His Majesty's Ship "Blossom," sent from England to cooperate with the polar expeditions in search of a northwest passage.

Beechey wrote in the "Narrative", "Far more liberal has been the hand of nature to this most neglected country, in bestowing upon it a climate remarkable for its healthfulness. The Spanish settlers in California enjoy an almost uninterrupted state of good health. Many attain the age of 80 or 90 and some have exceeded a hundred years."

He went on to state that La Perouse, Vancouver, and Langsdorff, who had visited California and Monterey years before the "Blossom" had anchored in Monterey Bay, has been of the same opinion. They had recorded the general health of the Spanish settlers, and stated that they also judged by the benefit that their seamen derived from the climate during their stay, that it certainly appeared not to be surpassed. The summer and early part of the autumn are the least healthy in these parts, in consequence of continued fogs, which occur during these periods, Beechey wrote.

The sketch of Upper California was concluded in the "Narrative" with a short description of the Indians' mode of living, and the natural productions of the country, derived principally from the information of the priests at the missions, and from the journals of the officers who went overland to Monterey.

Beechey observed that in the Mission San Carlos there were 11 different dialects spoken; their villages consisted of wigwams made with poles, covered with bullrushes, ad generally placed in an open plain to avoid surprise. They moved about the country and pitched their tents wherever they found a convenient place, keeping, however, within their own district.

The captain also observed that these Indians cultivated no land, and subsisted entirely upon the chase, and upon the natural produce of the earth. Acorns, of which there was plenty, constituted their principal vegetable food. During the proper season they would collect a

goodly supply of these, bake them, and then bruise them between two stones into a paste, which would keep until the next season. This paste, he noticed, was given several washings in a sieve, before it was dried, which washed away the bitter taste common to the acorn.

The crew of the English brig saw the Indians' method of taking ducks, geese and other wild fowl and this is also described in the "Narrative." In brief, they would construct large nets of bullrushes and repair to the river, where they fixed a long pole upright on each bank, and with one end of the net attached to the pole on the opposite side of the river to themselves. Several artificial ducks made of rushes were then set afloat upon the water between the poles, as decoys, and the Indians, who would have a line fastened to one end of the net, and passed through a hole in the upper end of the pole nearest them, would wait the arrival of their game in concealment. When the birds would approach, the Indians would suddenly extend the net across the river by pulling upon the line, intercepting them in their flight. When they fell stunned into the large purse-like arrangement in the net, they were captured.

Beechey found all the Indian tribes were idolatrous in their religion. The Olchones who inhabited the seacoast between San Francisco and Monterey in 1826, worshipped the sun and believed in the existence of a beneficent and an evil spirit, whom they occasionally attempted to pacify. Their ideas of a future state were very confined: When an Indian died they adorned the body with feathers, flowers and beads, and placed with it a bow and arrows; they then extended it upon a pile of wood and burned it amid the shouts of the spectators who wished the soul a pleasant journey to its new abode, which they supposed to be a country in the direction of the setting sun. They also believed that their tribe came from the far north.