

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Voyage of the Ship 'Civilian'

One hundred and three years ago this month there appeared upon the streets of New York and elsewhere along the Atlantic coast a broadside announcing: "For California! The good schooner 'Civilian,' 170 tons, newly coppered, and four years old, commanded by Capt. Thomas Dodge."

Capt. Dodge was a resident of Chatham, and he planned to sail for California on Oct. 20th. The schooner was owned by the "Cochituate Company of California" and was announced as nearly full on the published broadside, which also printed a drawing of the great sailing vessel with sails full in the wind. The advertisement also stated that "she is fitted up with superior accommodations, is a fast sailing vessel, and offers advantages equal to if not superior to any vessel that has yet been put up." E.W. Jackson was the agent and Rand & Co.'s Job Press, 3 Cornhill, Boston, were the printers.

The Book Club of California recently published a facsimile of 12 rare California Broadside or Posters, with explanatory comment by various authorities, in which is the "To California in '49, Announcing the Departure of the Boston Schooner Civilian for the Gold Field." The original of the enclosed poster, printed on pale pink paper, is owned by Carl I. Wheat, who also wrote the text which accompanied the broadside. The series is edited by Oscar Lewis and printed at the Greenwood Press in San Francisco.

News of the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill reached the Eastern seaboard across the plains early in the summer of 1848, but the official announcement of the find did not come until Dec. 5, when the President noted it in his message to Congress. Through the ensuing winter further details became known, as ships from the West Coast arrived in Eastern ports. Young men in groups made up parties to travel from Missouri the trans-plains trek; others headed for the Isthmus, and still others crowded every available ship for the long voyager around the Horn, wrote Mr. Wheat.

These ephemeral posters are today rare and unusual souvenirs of the great gold rush, for few have survived over the years. However, one young man – his name unknown today – carefully preserved the

announcements of "The Good Schooner Civilian," and with it were found two sheets of paper on which he, one of its California-bound passengers, wrote brief notes of the voyage and drew several pictures of the ship itself. Unlike the woodcut on the poster, the Civilian was a two-master, as good schooners apparently were in 1849. That she was seaworthy is shown by the fact that having sailed from Boston on Nov. 9 (instead of Oct. 20, as advertised), she made it through to San Francisco in 142 days, only 128 of which were spent at sea, Mr. Wheat writes.

The famous schooner stopped at St. Catherine's and Valparaiso, and the ship with 58 passengers (eight taken on at the latter seaport), and a crew consisting of Thomas Dodge, the captain, two mates, two cooks, two stewards, and five seamen, reached San Francisco on April 4, 1850. One of the drawings carries the notation: "We have now 18 sails" and a list is attached giving the names of each. Another note relates that "this day I finished my tent to be my house in California, being now within 2,000 miles of it," while still another reads: "All well and in good spirits, making all preparations to obtain the filthy lucre."

What later may have happened to this young member of the "Cochituate Company of California" is not recorded but the fact that the poster and the accompanying notes and drawings turned up a few years ago in New England leads to the belief that he, like so many other of the gold-seekers, returned to his eastern home after the great adventure of the Horn and after an appropriate and, we may trust, satisfying view of the "Elephant," and we quote Carl I. Wheat.