

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Chronicle of the Golden State

We have just read again the fascinating book, "Seventy-five Years in California" by William Heath Davis, and we unreservedly recommend it to our readers. The book is an informal history of California from the Mexican era up to the state's admission to the Union and is written in a chatty style by a man who knew personally many of the people described in its pages.

This valuable and interesting work was a revised edition of the author's earlier book "Sixty Years in California," and it did not see the light of print until 20 years after Mr. Davis' death – and then only after a series of almost fatal adventures.

At the time of San Francisco's great earthquake and fire in 1906, Mr. Davis's manuscript, contained in two dispatch boxes and ready for the printer, was in his office in the Montgomery block. He tried to enter the building to save the book upon which he had labored for many years but was restrained by the U.S. Marines. As it happened the building did not burn, but when Davis returned for his manuscript it had mysteriously disappeared.

Eighty-four years of age at that time, Davis was then faced with the heart-breaking task of reconstructing his book from the fragments and notes which he had kept in his home. He died three years later in 1909, and his heirs passed the papers on to other hands. Fortunately, they were eventually acquired by the Huntington Library, and due to the hearty cooperation of this institution, the book was finally assembled in its present form. It was published in 1929 by John Howell of San Francisco and carries a dedication to "Herbert Hoover: Exemplifier of American ideals and foremost Californian."

Davis' intimacy with the foremost men of California, whose lives of heroic stature are woven into the history of our Golden State, makes this book a collectors' item and wonderful reading for anyone. As John Howell says, "It is an encyclopedia of episodes and personal portraits. It is an acknowledged source book for the period which it covers."

The author came from a seafaring, ship-owning Boston family, although he was born in Honolulu in 1822. His father, William Heath Davis Sr., married a daughter of

Oliver Holmes, another Boston shipmaster and a relative of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes. We know that the shipping trade between the coast and Hawaii was almost exclusively in the hands of Boston firms from its beginning until the California gold rush. Davis' grandmother was a native of Hawaii and her husband, Oliver Holmes, in addition to his trading operations was at one time governor of Oahu.

Another of Oliver Holmes daughters married Nathan Spear, who, in partnership with William Sturgis Hinckley and Jacob Primer Leese, was one of the first merchants to settle in San Francisco.

After two visits in Monterey, one in 1831, another in 1838, Davis arrived aboard the "Don Quixote" to enter the service of his uncle, Nathan Spear as a clerk in the latter's store here. In 1842 he sailed as supercargo on the same ship and made several trips to the Hawaiian Islands.

After 1845 Davis became a resident of San Francisco and entering into business there in his own behalf became one of the town's most prominent merchants and ship owners. In 1847 he married Maria de Jesus, daughter of Don Joaquin Estudillo, a wealthy rancher. He died in Hayward on April 19, 1909.

(More on Wednesday)