

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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And the President Lived On

While Mrs. K. Hovden and I were going over the 1848 letters of Charles Tyler Botts which related the gold discovery in California, she showed me another letter which was thrilling to see and to hold. It ended with the signature of A. Lincoln and was entirely written in the Civil War President's own handwriting. This letter had also once been the property of Admiral John A. Dahlgren who handed it down to his son, C.B. Dahlgren, who in turn gave it to his son, J.B. Dahlgren, an uncle by marriage of Mrs. Hovden.

The letter was written from the executive mansion on June 10, 1861 to Captain Dahlgren and read: "My Dear Sir: You have seen Mr. Blunt's new gun. What do you think of it? Would the government do well to purchase some of them? Should they be of the size of the one exhibited? Or of different sizes? Yours truly, A. Lincoln."

In a very old book, printed in 1867, and titled "Farragut and Our Naval Commanders" by Hon. J.T. Headley, comprising the early life and public services of the prominent naval commanders who, with Grant and Sherman and their generals, brought to a triumphant close "the Great Rebellion of 1861-1865," there is a full chapter on the life and work of Admiral Dahlgren.

In 1847 Dahlgren set up the first ordnance workshop in the country at the Navy yard in Washington. From such a beginning arose the present great establishment. He later was determined to create a "naval light artillery." Although he had only the most primitive means at hand, yet the first gun was made – and there being no boring laths in the yard, he had it finished in an ordinary lathe. It required a peculiar carriage and this he also devised. In 1859 the Navy department recognized the system and ordered a full compliance with it, and it remained unaltered from its first design.

Dahlgren later asked for the casting of his 11-inch gun. These guns are still known as "Dahlgrens."

Admiral John Dahlgren was a personal friend of President Lincoln. In the Headley book there are many references to meetings and conversations between the two men. One interesting one happened on the Sunday that the tidings were received of the terrible destruction the Merrimac was making around Fort Monroe with our vessels of war. Dahlgren was sitting in

his office when the President was announced. He stepped out to the carriage, when Mr. Lincoln said "Get your hat and ride with me." As he took his seat by the President's side the latter said, "I have frightful news to tell you," and then in a calm earnest manner related to him what the Merrimac had done. In half an hour they were at the White House.

Headley writes of the former commander of the South Pacific squadron: "Dahlgren, by his inventive genius in the construction of ordnance, and his bold and original plan of arming vessels of war, has done more for the Navy of our country, than probably any single man in it (1867). At the same time he has given it eclat abroad, for every European writer on ordnance and ship armament, has to recognize his genius and improvements."

This great man's grandson, J.B. Dahlgren, became a successful New York lawyer and married Luisa Archer, the daughter of the late Dr. Samuel Archer, early Monterey County physician. Mrs. Dahlgren since the death of her husband, had lived in Monterey and on the old family ranch near Jamesburg where her sister, Mrs. Mary Davis, also resides.

It seems appropriate here to write of a small book "The Lost Years" by Oscar Lewis, which was recently published by Alfred A. Knopf in New York. The Lost Years is a biographical fantasy in which the author discovers the records that reveal why no history book ever has been able to tell the full story about our best-loved President (Lincoln).

From the jacket of the book we quote: "The month of April, the year 1865. All Washington waited eagerly for a glimpse of the general who had ended the war. When the general cancelled his appearance at the theater, the President attended instead. During the third act the assassin crept to the door of the presidential box" we know the rest of the story. But the fantasy relates that the great man was not fatally wounded as so many believed.

"And so the President lived on. When his second term ended he was definitely more lighthearted after his return to his home in Illinois... an old ambition stirred. For years he had wanted to go to California, and at last he was free to go. He seemed to thrive under the warm sunshine, the good climate. But gradually his heart became troubled. Then a Memorial Day parade, held in Auburn, California, a little girl, and a laundry wagon

provided a surprising climax. Rarely has the personality of the Shogun, as the President was sometimes called, been drawn so delightfully.