

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Red Woolen Shirts

Among the most prominent of the early California merchants was William Davis Merry Howard, a native of Boston, who first visited the state in 1846 as an agent of a company engaged in the hide and tallow trade in his native city. Naturally this business looked greener on the West Coast and here he settled permanently in 1846, and became a partner in the Mellus-Howard Company. This company stood second to none on the Pacific Coast for all that makes trade honorable and business successful. He had come to California via steamer, and thus became a "First Steamship Pioneer."

Howard became the first president of the California Pioneer Society, an organization which still exists with headquarters in San Francisco and members throughout the state

Captain Howard was a merchant trained in that profession but he was also a good judge of real estate

Charles L. Ross, another pioneer of the steamship days, arrived in Monterey about the same time as Stevenson's regiment. He was in command of the bark "Whiton" with a cargo of miscellaneous goods. Going on to San Francisco he opened a store and when the ship departed the remainder of the ship's cargo was unloaded and remained outside the store at Montgomery and Washington streets. In those days exposed property was perfectly safe from the depredations of thieves and so Mr. Ross felt perfectly safe to leave it there.

In 1850 Ross purchased from Thomas O. Larkin the property now occupied by the Montgomery Block with other lots, for the sum of \$300,000 and erected a large brick building at a cost of over \$100,000. In the brick building was established the first Merchants' Exchange, by the son of Commodore Sloat.

It was only once in a great while that a vessel came into the San Francisco harbor with merchandise and when one did it was of the utmost importance to get the first chance at her supercargo. In order to do this the rival firms of Howard and Mellus and G.L. Ross, each kept the best boat and a set of oarsmen procurable, always ready at a moment's notice, "to jump aboard and pull for life," when the vessel entered the Golden Gate.

One day a brig was announced, so the story goes. In a moment Howard had the rudder lines of his boat, and Ross those of his, and every oarsman sprang to his "ash" to his utmost. The race was close and closely contested for about three miles, but Ross was 100 yards ahead when he grasped the ropes and sprang over the bulwarks. The captain, who was also supercargo, met him at the rail, when, without one preliminary word, Ross said, in his peculiarly rapid manner.

"Got any red flannel shirts?"

"Yes," said the skipper, "a hundred dozen."

Without asking a single question as to what else the vessel contained Ross said:

"What will you take for your entire cargo, everything on the ship?"

"A hundred per cent on New York invoice," said the captain.

"It is done," said Ross, as he handed the skipper a hundred dollars, "and this binds the bargain."

And as the captain received the money, and said "Yes," Howard reached the deck. "There were no "red woolen shirts" in the country, and every miner must have a pair, even if they cost a hundred dollars, and C.L. Ross knew it.