

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Eliza Farnham's Folly

It is sad when history remembers a lady chiefly for her failure; but, then, there are some failures so magnificent that in retrospect they appear almost to be triumphs. Such was Eliza Woodson Farnham's. Her life and work has been kept alive in California through collectors of Californiana and the California Historical Society in San Francisco. The latter organization has on display in their headquarters a broadside announcing the objects of the California Association of American Women in 1849, of which Mrs. Farnham was the leader.

An exact reproduction of the broadside, signed by Eliza W. Farnham, has been included in the keepsake for 1952, sent by the Book Club of California to its members, under the title "Attention Pioneers!"

The reproduction of Mrs. Farnham's broadside, dated from New York on February 2nd, 1849, is included in a folder with a text written by David Magee.

Mrs. Farnham proposed to bring women from the East Coast to the West Coast in those early years of the gold rush. She began the explanation of her desire with this sentence: "The death of my husband, Thomas J. Farnham, Esq., at San Francisco, in September last, renders it expedient that I should visit California during the coming season. Having a desire to accomplish some greater good by my journey thither than to give the necessary attention to my private affairs, and believing that the presence of women would be one of the surest checks upon many of the evils that are apprehended there, I desire to ask attention to the following sketch of a plan for organizing a party of such persons to emigrate to this country."

Mrs. Farnham, author of "California In-Doors and Out" was a social worker and her efforts to improve the state of the world in general, and of California in particular, were laudable if somewhat naïve, wrote Mr. Magee. One would have thought that four years as matron of Sing Sing prison would have taught her something of the frailty of her sex. But apparently not. Perhaps she was just an incurable optimist, thinks Magee.

In any event, she was determined that what California needed in that turbulent, gold-crazy year of '49 was the touch of a woman's – a good woman's hand, and to supply this need she lent her considerable energies. In

the broadside, Mrs. Farnham wrote: "Among the many privations and deteriorating influences to which the thousands who are flocking thither will be subjected, one of the greatest is the absence of women, with all her kindly cares and powers, so peculiarly conservative to man under such circumstances."

Bride ships were not unusual or unknown to America, for they had sailed from England to the colonies two centuries earlier, but the practice had long since fallen into disuse – until Eliza Farnham revived it. Her circular must have caused quite a stir, that winter of '49, and perhaps for many a little dismay. For the qualifications laid down by this stern moralist were not those of the 17th century.

In the third paragraph of the broadside Mrs. Farnham wrote: "It would exceed the limits of this circular to hint at the benefits that would flow to the growing population of that wonderful region, from the introduction among them of an intelligent, virtuous and efficient woman. Of such only, it is proposed to make up this company. It is believed that there are hundreds, if not thousands of such females in our country who are not bound by any ties that would hold them here, who might, by going thither, have the satisfaction of employing themselves greatly to the benefit and advantage of those who are there, and at the same time of serving their own interests more effectively than by following any employment that's offered to them here."

The circular went on to state that it was proposed that the company should consist of persons not under 25 years of age, who should bring from their clergyman or some authority of the town where they resided, satisfactory testimonials of education, character, capacity, etc., and who could contribute the sum of \$250 to defray the expenses of the voyage, make suitable provision for their accommodation after reaching San Francisco, until they should be able to enter upon some occupation for their support and create a fund to be held in reserve for the relief of any who may be ill or otherwise need aid before they would be able to provide for themselves.

(More tomorrow)