

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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O (Barefoot) Pioneers!

"An Old California Pioneer, by Peter H. Burnett, first governor of the state" is number 13 in the list of "Zamorano 80." The recollections and opinions of this early pioneer were first published by D. Appleton & Company, 1880; the California Centennial edition of 1946, published by Biobooks of Oakland, with a foreword by Joseph A. Sullivan, is a splendid example of the continuing processes of history.

In order that the history of the first governor of the State of California might be published, the Bancroft Library relinquished the text, as well as permitting examination of the copy of the Burnett's manuscript; the library of the State of California also permitted the use of their copy of J.H. Colton's map, 1849.

Burnett was born in Tennessee; among other accomplishments, he became district attorney in Missouri and later Supreme Justice in Oregon Territory (now Idaho, Washington and Oregon). He dedicated his book to his friend, Alexander W. Donophan, an associate of General Stephen Kearney.

During the winter of 1842-43 Burnett read the congressional report of Senator Appleton in reference to Oregon, which proposed to donate to each immigrant 640 acres of land for himself, and 160 acres for each child.

As Burnett had a wife and six children, and would therefore be entitled to 1,600 acres, he saw no reason for not proceeding to the West Coast. The start was made from Independence, Mo., on the 17th of May of 1843. The family possessions consisted of two ox wagons, one small two-horse wagon, four yoke of oxen, two mules, and a fair supply of provisions.

After arriving in Oregon and settling down, Burnett was compelled to become a farmer, there being few opportunities in law practice. Provisions and supplies were difficult to procure. The Hudson Bay Company imported its supply of shoes from England, but the stock arriving was wholly inadequate to the family's wants, and they had no money with which to buy.

As yet there were no tan yards in operation. Burnett relates that in 1844 a tannery was commenced but the fall supply of leather was tanned only on the outside, having a raw streak in the center. It was undressed, not

even curried. But from this material Burnett made shoes for himself and his family and a young hired man. To keep the shoes soft enough to wear throughout the day, it was necessary to soak them in water at night.

Burnett relates that his father had been accustomed to tanning his own leather and making his shoes and had taught his son to do the coarse sewed work. But in Oregon Burnett had to take the measure of the foot, make the last, fit the patterns to the last, cut out the leathers, and make the shoe. He used "tanned deer skin for the females and small boys."

Using his own words we will repeat a story told by Burnett of another shoe tragedy in Oregon: "The greatest difficulty I had to encounter for the want of shoes was in 1844. I had sown some three acres of wheat about the first of May, and it was absolutely necessary to enclose it by the first of June to make a crop. I did not commence plowing until about the 20th of April. My team was raw, and so was I, and it required several days trial to enable us to do good work. While I was engaged in making and hauling rails to fence in my wheat, my old boots gave out entirely, and I have no time to look for a substitute.

"I was determined to save my wheat at any sacrifice, and therefore I went barefoot. During the first week, my feet were very sore, but after that there came a shield over them, so that I could work with great ease, and go almost anywhere except among thorns."