

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Settlers With Skins of Blue

Peter H. Burnett, the first governor of the State of California, was a true "man of the soil." He was grounded in politics but knew life on the farm and the western trails. He was acquainted with the great men of his day and he had a sense of the direction of history. Starting out as a comparatively poor boy, he crossed the continent with a wife and seven children and took up land in the Oregon territory; he worked hard, even to making his and the family's shoes.

By permission of a neighbor, a sincere minister, Burnett and his brother William were allowed to occupy temporarily the log cabin then used for a church, upon the condition that Burnett would permit the minister to have services there on Sunday. The congregation consisted of about 30 persons. Burnett wrote in his memoirs that he could not very well absent himself from the services, as it was his duty to attend. He related that he therefore took a seat in one corner of the building where his "bare feet" would not be much noticed.

The congregation collected, and the services went on as usual, with the addition of some church business, which happened to come up on that particular occasion. The sea-breeze set in early that day, Burnett related, and before the church business was finished it became quite cold. The minister was a thin, spare man, very sensitive to cold, and requested Burnett to make a fire in the stove. He did not hesitate a moment, according to his own story, but went through the congregation and made the fire. All those in attendance wore moccasins, and stared at Burnett's bare feet as he passed.

On one occasion, Burnett remembered, he, a young hired man, and his son, Dwight, were down to their last working shirts. It was harvest-time, and where or how to procure new shirts he could not tell. Still Burnett was so well accustomed to these things that he was not too perplexed.

At the time Burnett was judge of the Supreme Court in the new Oregon, so by great good luck, he was asked to perform a marriage ceremony between a young man of his acquaintance and a certain young lady. Burnett married the couple, and the groom presented him with

an order on a store for five dollars. With this gift he purchased some blue twilled cotton (the best goods obtainable), from which Mrs. Burnett made each of the men a shirt. The material wore well Burnett recalled, but having been colored with log-wood, the shirts – until the color faded from them – left their wearer's skins quite blue.

In May 1845, Burnett recorded in his autobiography that the family was entirely without anything to eat in the house. He did not know what to do, when Mrs. Burnett suggested a remedy. The year before they had cultivated a small patch of potatoes, and in digging had left some in the ground, and these had sprung up among the young wheat. The family dug a mess of potatoes, which sufficed them for a meal, though not a very good one. That year Burnett sowed about one acre in turnips, which grew to considerable size. According to Burnett, the vegetables most easily grown in new countries were lettuce, turnips, potatoes and squashes.

In 1847, Burnett bought a leather hunting-shirt which he saw on a young man in Oregon City. The young man said he would take seven bushels of wheat for the shirt. Burnett wore the shirt to the gold mines in California in the fall of 1848 and continued to wear it during most of the winter of 1848-'49. When a nephew borrowed the shirt and failed to return it, Burnett wrote that he regretted the loss; he had desired to preserve the shirt as a memento of old times.