Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Narrative of a Western Trapper

We have discussed several times in the Diary the history of Zamorano, California's first printer, who lived and published in Monterey in 1825. (Mention has also been made of the Zamorano Club, an organization in Los Angeles composed solely of men who wanted to study and enjoy the art of books; and of the list of "Zamorano 80," a bibliography of distinguished books on California which are considered essential to any collector of Californiana.

Number 50 in the list of "must" books is "The Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard." Leonard was a native of Clearfield County, Pa., who spent five years in trapping for furs and trading with the Indians of the Rocky Mountains. The book was written by himself, and was printed and published by D.W. Moore in 1839 in Clearfield Pa.

According to the publisher's preface issued at the time of the first printing, Zenas Leonard was a trapper, rather than an agent for an established fur company. His camp in the Rocky Mountains was entirely cut off from civilization and located amidst hostile Indians; he sustained himself solely by his rifle and his traps.

In 1831 Zenas Leonard embarked from St. Louis; after four years wandering, which took him to the then strange land of Spanish California, he returned to his paternal home in Clearfield, Pa., where he was greeted as one returned from the dead. In due time the young man wrote out his stories of his adventure in the West for publication.

At first the hometown paper printed bits of the story. Two or three years later the publisher again borrowed the manuscript and printed it in its entirety in the Clearfield Republican, and finally issued it in book form in 1839. The narrative thus preserved is one of great human interest and of decided historical value. It was long unknown to historians of the West and copies of the original edition have become so rare as to command a price, in auction market, of many hundreds of dollars.

We found Leonard's description of Monterey slightly different than that of other explorers, both before and after his visit here in 1833. After camping and resting for some time at San Juan, the party – under the direction of Captain Walker – continued on to Monterey.

Leonard's narrative provides the following description: "The town is built on a beautiful situation on the south side of Monterey Bay. This is the capital of Upper, or North California, and is under the government of New Mexico. The town is small, containing only about 30 or 40 dwelling houses, one church, one calaboose, a part of which is used as a house of justice, or in other words, a court house, where the governor transacts his public business, and a kind of fort, built in a commanding situation on the edge of the bay, to be used in the defense of the town in case an attack should be made upon it from the sea, containing several pieces of artillery.

"This bay is very deep, affording an excellent harbor for any number of vessels. The town has every natural advantage that a seaport could desire; and if a proper spirit of enterprise prevailed among the inhabitants, it might be made to flourish equal to any other town in the dominions of New Mexico. Vessels sailing the coast of the Pacific to the north, all stop here to take on supplies, and it is the last white settlement they pass, until they reach the Russian dominions of the northwest; but as the inhabitants raise no grain, only what is raised for home consumption; the mariner is only enabled to supply his vessels with meat and water.

"Besides the advantage the agriculturist might derive by supplying vessels with provisions, he might be enabled to carry on a large exporting business – as the soil and climate is very calculated to raise large crops of grain. Another prominent advantage the town would have, is the faculty of internal communication with the Indians now inhabiting the prairies and mountains of the interior, or the white race, who, it may reasonably be expected, will have undisputed dominion over this entire region before long."