

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 8, 1953

### **California's First American**

Who was the first American to settle in California? To this question many incorrect answers have been given, we know, but Dr. Rockwell Hunt, dean emeritus of the history department of the College of the Pacific at Stockton, has made extensive research on the subject and has come to the conclusion that Thomas W. Doak, a young seaman of 29, was actually the first American to settle in this state.

It is true that the Boston fur ships brought Americans to the California coast years before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Empress of China was the real pioneer, arriving as early as 1784. But we have no record of actual settlers coming on these early Boston vessels.

Dr. Hunt states that it is reported that an American whose name was given as John Groem (Graham?) arrived Sept. 13, 1791, with the Spanish command of Alejandro Malaspina but the further report that he was buried on that very day cancels any claim that he became an American settler.

John Gilroy, having changed his real name, which was Cameron, in order to avoid deportation, arrived in 1814, was baptized in the Catholic faith, married a young senorita, built an adobe home on his league of land, where he lived for many years.

Bu Gilroy was a Scotchman, and not an American. He did antedate the first American settler by a slight margin, thus supporting the claim to being the first foreigner to settle permanently in the territory, according to Dr. Hunt. Most important is the fact that his name is perpetuated by the town of Gilroy in Santa Clara Bouny.

Jedediah Smith has the distinction of being the first American to lead a party overland into California. He came not to settle, however, but as a trapper, and his arrival was years after the coming of the first American settler.

The best records indicate, as we quote Dr. Hunt: "that a young seaman of 19, Thomas W. Doak, arrived at Monterey in March, 1816, on the ship Albatross; that he deserted from the vessel and became the first bona fide American settler in the Province of California."

On being baptized on Dec. 22 of that year, he took the name of Felipe Santiago, and was thenceforth a devout Roman Catholic. In 1820, with viceregal permission, he was married to Maria Lugarda, daughter of Jose Mariano Castro, the ceremony being performed in San Juan Bautista Mission.

According to best information we can collect, Doak (Santiago) seems to have been a carpenter, with a reputation for good habits, but without claims to real distinction. Most of his days were spent in the vicinity of the Mission, a very pleasant and peaceful spot.

With the aid of two Indian neophytes he painted the mission altar and pulpit. Being more of a sailor than an artist, the job was perhaps poorly done but was a good example of primitive art. "But since the standard of piety was higher than that of art," states Dr. Hunt, "his devout work was approved, giving universal satisfaction."

After an uneventful life, quite removed from the material activities of the time, he died about the year 1848, leaving four children and good personal record.

(To be continued)