

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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How to Learn Spanish

For the past several days we have been having great fun reading the "Journal and Letters" of James Henry Gleason, early California pioneer, as contributed by his grandson, Duncan Gleason, the well-known marine painter, for publication in the quarterly of the Historical Society of California in 1949.

Editors of the quarterly believe that these letters which had never before been published, are among the best for descriptions of conditions of society in California in the 40s and 50s that have been brought to light.

Duncan Gleason, who has been a frequent visitor to Monterey and an enthusiastic admirer of the historic buildings here, writes in the forward: "The letters may not comprise a chronological history, but they give a series of important events in California history depicted with all the buoyant enthusiasm of a young man just entering upon a career in a foreign land." Mr. Gleason in addition to his painting, is a writer and the author of "The Islands of California."

The letters of James Henry Gleason were preserved by his uncle, The Rev. Herbert Gleason of Boston, and in 1892 were turned over to Duncan Gleason's mother, Eleanor Duncan Gleason, who arrived in California from Missouri in a prairie schooner shortly after the gold rush. Her father was captain of wagon train, which came "to halt in the shadow of the San Juan Bautista Mission, around which she spent her girlhood days." Later she lived in Monterey and was one of the pioneer school teachers here.

The first letter dated from Monterey was written March 30, 1846, within a few days after the arrival of James Duncan Gleason from the Sandwich Islands, where he had been employed by his uncle, William Paty.

Amusing is the introduction he gives his sister in Plymouth to the Monterey and California: "I am much please with this coast, the climate is very healthy and the Spanish lasses, you are aware, are so exceedingly amiable that one could almost imagine himself a portion of heaven while moving through the dizzy waltz with a beautiful blue-eyed Spanish maid for a partner"

By June young Gleason was experiencing the beginning of early struggles in California right here in Monterey. He wrote his uncle in Honolulu: "For the last few days

there has been considerable excitement in this place. Dr. Stoker arrived here from the upper pueblo on Tuesday last bringing us intelligence that 37 Americans had risen in the Sacramento and taken Sonoma for force and made prisoners of four California officers, Don. M.G. Vallejo, Don Salvador Vallejo, Don Victor Prudon, and Louis Leace. Gen. Castro immediately mustered his forces in this place, about 80 in number and this forenoon marched out to San Juan to arrange his troops and proceed to Sonoma to retake the place. It is considered doubtful whether they will muster courage to meet them when they are prepared"

In a letter to his sister Frances in Plymouth, young Gleason told her of his duty as supercargo on his uncle's vessel. He wrote that when a vessel arrives from Boston or the Islands she is supposed to proceed to Monterey and declare her cargo at the Aduana to pay customs duty. The supercargo attends to all the business of selling and trading. He further wrote that all possible was disposed of at Monterey and then they sailed South stopping at all the little coves where there were any settlements nearby. When the anchor was down a gun was fired and soon the news spread over countryside that a trader was in. "Soon clouds of dust along the roads indicated that the shoppers were approaching, some on foot, others on horseback or in a squeaking carretas and they are all laughing and gay. Tackles are rigged on the fore and main yards to hoist out the boats all day long and into the night pass to and from the beach to bring off the men, women and children. Spanish grandees, Indians and maybe a padre or two from a nearby mission, and of course the lovely senioritas. These latter are very distracting and would that I were not so busy with my duties. Uncle John is usually in the after cabin with some rancheros bargaining for hides or tallow over a bottle of California wine. Children are scampering about the deck and the men are busy keeping them out of the rigging.

"I always receive a hearty welcome and at the ranchos the business of contracting for the hides is accompanied by fandangos. I am mastering the Spanish language and find the best way to add to my vocabulary is while embracing one of the dark-eyed senioritas which engaged in the waltz which is popular in the district."

(To be continued)