

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Champion of the Indian

Hugo Reid's influence among the lowly Indian in Southern California extended beyond the Indians in his own home and found most effective expression while "El Perfecto" was serving as a southern delegate to California's Constitutional Convention, held here in Monterey during September and October, 1849.

All during the convention Reid was a champion of Indian rights. He had made a study of the California Indian tribes, even in those early days, and wrote essays regarding their culture. Immediately after his appearance at the convention, Reid was appointed to two important committees. The task of one was "to report ... at as early a day as practicable, a plan for taking the enumeration of the inhabitants of the State of California," which means a census as Monterey has just taken. Members of the second committee were asked by the president of the convention to determine "what in their opinion, should constitute the boundary of the State of California."

According to Hugo Reid, as related by Mrs. Dakin in "Hugo Reid, Humanitarian": "The 48 men of varied nationality, age, religion, occupation and political conviction who were crowded into the adobe known as Colton Hall 'disputed like the devil at home' – about such endlessly controversial subjects as the rights of women and Indians. But they accomplished their purpose in six weeks of hard thinking and reasonable compromise.

Aside from establishing the boundaries of the state and starting census of the population, they defined a mode of election of executive, legislature, and judicial officers, made the usual American provisions for the protection of life and property and devised a system of taxation. Also they ordered the foundation of the state-wide school system and outlawed slavery. The constitution was signed by all the delegates on Oct. 13, 1849.

As an educated man, a Scotchman who had been a merchant in Mexico, then 22 years of age, Reid returned to California for the second time in 1834 to reside permanently. For a time he was in business in Los Angeles, with Don Abel Stearns and Don Juan Bandini. After acquiring Santa Anita Rancho, he sold 13,500 acres for 20 cents an acre.

Reid had had experience in teaching his adopted children, so his experience with the Indians had been respected among the conference table delegates at the constitutional convention, when he stated that Indians needed only the opportunity of education to profit from it. He championed the provisions for public schools in California and went on record as being anti-slavery. Certain disputes during the convention convinced Reid that ignorant prejudice was the Indians' cruelest enemy.

At the close of the convention and after his return to Southern California Reid began his final task. He remembered a promise made to Dona Victoria during courting days that, in time, he would attempt to vindicate her people through his writings. Now, in middle age and ill health, he no longer could be distracted by other pursuits.

"Old Reid," as he was called at the age of 40 years, had acquired a deep understanding of the Indian nature after living so long, in rare companionship, with an intelligent member of the Indian race. Dona Victoria agreed to help him by searching her mind and memory, and gaining the complete confidence of her people. With this encouragement, Reid started to write the essays that were to constitute his most lasting claim to fame. They took the form of 22 "Letters on the Los Angeles County Indians" which were published in the Los Angeles Star, commencing on Saturday, Feb. 21, 1852, and continuing weekly.

He wrote of their languages, lodges, government, laws and punishment, religion and creed, food and raiment, marriage, births and burials, medicine and diseases, customs, traffic and utensils, sports and games, tradition, fables, legends, the first arrival of the Spaniards, conversion, first missionary proceedings, new era in mission affairs, decay of the missions.

Encouraged by the response received from the interested public in his first literary efforts, Hugo Reid, again depended upon his Dona Victoria to supply him with more material and began another long-cherished project, that of applying a vocabulary and complete manual, Indian-English, for the Southern California tribes, that they might understand their new masters and fare better. But before completing this project he fell ill and died on Dec. 12, 1852, at the age of 41 years.