

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Sea Otter Hunting

"Sea Otter Hunting" should be the heading for today's Diary when we retell the story of the sea otter trade up and down the California coast as told many years ago by Jack Swan, pioneer builder of California's First Theater in Monterey. Swan wrote the article on Oct. 8, 1875, and it was probably published in one of the early newspapers, although we have found no credit line.

Swan began his story of the sea otter with several historical notations such as: "Under the Spanish rule otter hunting was prohibited on the coast of California. Thomas Doak, who left a Boston vessel engaged in the fur trade on the northwest coast of America in 1814 and 1815, told me in 1845, that the sea otter could be seen not far from where the old Custom House is now, and no one was allowed to shoot them. Afterward under Mexican rule people had to take out a license. Some hunters did very well at the business"

We know that Thomas Doak was in Monterey in 1841, for he worked on the old Custom House building during the time, under Mexican rule, that the building was being constructed or changed by Thomas Oliver Larkin. His name was listed among the carpenters in Larkin's account book now in the Bancroft Library.

Swan goes on to relate that Capt. J.B.R. Cooper brought down a lot of Kodiak Indians with their cayucas or skin canoes from the northwest coast. They were very skillful at spearing the otter and slaughtered a large number. Andrew Watson, another pioneer of this region, accompanied Capt. Cooper on one of his sea otter hunting expeditions on the coast.

In 1875 when Jack Swan wrote of the business of otter hunting he said that the otter was very scarce on the coast then, but that a few might be seen in the neighborhood of the Sur, and on the Santa Barbara coast, but that in the early days it was a profitable business that a skillful and lucky hunter could embark in.

Among the most successful otter hunters of the early days was one called Black Steward. One morning, Swan related, Steward walked through the pine forest to the beach between Points Pinos and Cypress and returned in the afternoon with the pelts of seven otters which he

had shot and skinned, a rich day's work considering the high price paid for pelts.

Next Swan related a grizzly bear story as concerned with the same Black Steward. Steward was a very powerful man if Swan's description of him may be depended upon. He was 6 feet in height and proportionately broad. Once, down the coast, while the hunting canoe was hauled up on the beach because of bad weather, Steward left the rest of the party by the camp fire, and taking with him his rifle, went into the woods alone.

About a mile or so from camp he met a grizzly bear. He fired at it but missed the mark, only wounding it. The bear grappled with him before Steward could either reload or make good his escape. Steward was badly bitten as he "grasped the bear's neck with his sinewy hands and at length choked him off and made his way with difficulty back to camp." His life was despaired of for several days but he eventually recovered.

The party of hunters went next day to hunt for the bear. They followed Steward's description and trail and finally found the bear dead. They examined his neck and found the marks of Steward's fingers around it as he had said they would, thus leaving no doubt as to the veracity of his story.