

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Capt. Peron's Adventures**

The original writing of Peron, who visited Monterey in 1796, on the Otter, the first American vessel to sail up the coast of California and touch at a California port – which was Monterey – were painstakingly abridged from the writer's lengthy manuscript by M. Benard, a 78-year-old friend.

In the introduction Henry R. Wagner, who translated these writings into English and first published them in the California Historical Society Quarterly in 1922, says that the China and Northwest trade was a triangular one. The vessel carried out an assortment of goods for trading purposes, traded these for sealskins on the South Sea Islands or sea otter skins on the Northwest Coast, proceeded to China, sold the skins and took on board a cargo of tea, silks, and other goods.

Capt. F.P. Peron makes his first appearance in the trading operations of the Dorr family about 1793 when he sailed aboard the Fairy from the Island of Amsterdam in the South Indian Ocean, where he had been hunting seals since Sept. 1, 1792. He had been marooned there since an American by the name of Owen had sailed away on the Emilie to hunt sea otters on the Northwest Coast. Owen had agreed to return for them in 15 months but he did not keep his promise. When found by Capt. Dorr, Peron traded 300 sealskins for a barrel of rice.

Peron was finally rescued during the fortieth month of his stay on New Amsterdam Island by Capt. Sir Thomas Hadley of the Ceres from London, Dec. 16, 1795. He agreed to give passage to Peron and his three companions but would not take aboard the 2,700 skins which they had collected. When Dorr arrived he took possession of the skins and sailed for Port Jackson where Peron had also landed. Instead of cash in payment for the skins Captain Dorr offered Peron a position as first officer for the duration of the trip, so it is of this trip that he writes in his "Memoires."

One of the interesting happenings during Peron's stay in Monterey was the result of the kindness of the governor.

"We lacked about 380 pounds of flour," he wrote. "The governor, in order to supply these provisions more quickly, gave the order in my presence to augment the

number of millers. I showed my surprise and could not understand how so many people were necessary for such a simple operation."

When Peron made his astonishment known to the governor he took him into the workroom where 15 to 20 Indians seated on their heels, having in front of them a flat stone two and one half feet in length and one half a foot in width. They held in their hands another stone of prismatic shape with which they were grinding the grain.

"I could not understand why a mill like those in Europe was not established in the capital of the government as extensive as that of California. The governor told me that Mr. de la Perouse had showed the same surprise as mine, and that he had the kindness to leave a model for a mill in a form as simple as it was economical, but that in spite of his encouragement and his orders, no worker up to that time had been found willing to put his hand to the work," Peron reported.

Peron returned to France in 1802 and his story ends. Ebenezer Dorr Jr. remained in and around Boston. He died on Jan. 1, 1847, at the age of 84 years and 12 days.

Herbert C. Dorr, Ebenezer's only son, took up his residence in California. He had some negotiations with Herbert Howe Bancroft about writing up the account of the Otter's visit to California, Wagner relates. Bancroft describes him as "a well known litterateur residing in San Francisco." He is also in possession of an interesting notation made by Bancroft on the bottom of a document relating to the voyage of the Otter.

Henry Wagner also relates in the notes at the end of his book that Herbert C. Dorr made his will in San Francisco on Dec. 9, 1887. His will and the oil portrait of Ebenezer Dorr Jr. are now in the possession of the California Historical Society. The portrait, which forms the frontispiece of "The First American Vessel in California," was bequeathed to the Society by Miss Caroline Dorr.