

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **The China Trade**

From the Thompson papers in the possession of the Santa Barbara Historical Society – papers which include a rich body of correspondence and documents on the Pacific maritime life of the Thompson family, dating from 1821 to 1869 – D. Mackenzie Brown, editor of “China Trade Days in California” has selected 25 of the more revealing and colorful of the letters. With the letters he presents explanatory commentaries and notes.

The small book by Brown was printed by the University of California Press in 1947, with a foreword by Robert Glass Cleland of the history department of the University of California at Los Angeles. D. Mackenzie Brown is associate professor of social sciences at Santa Barbara College.

We have chosen “China Trade Days in California” to review today, even though it was not recently published, because it contains so much of the history of an interesting era. It was three years after the Revolutionary War, when American ships were sailing for the Far East, and The Empress of China sailed from New York for Canton.

It was a little more than a quarter of a century later than Capt. Ebenezer Dorr, in command of the Boston ship names the Otter entered Monterey harbor and thereby gave the United States direct contact with California.

“The letters published in this small volume are of unusual historical importance,” according to Dr. Cleland’s foreword. They give intimate details of many of the leading figures in contemporary California history, they portray the life of the province vividly and realistically, they furnish an excellent picture of the ramifications and technical aspects of the commercial transactions of the time; but their chief value lies in the light they throw upon the historic China trade and the national and international aspects of California history of the pre-American period.

Alpheus Basil Thompson whose letters are used in the volume, married into the famous family of Carrillo. His father-in-law, Carlos Antonio Carrillo, was a distinguished citizen of Santa Barbara. He was in his turn, a soldier, rancho, legislator, administrator,

California representative in the Mexican National Congress, and governor of the province.

The Thompson letters and papers are now owned by the Santa Barbara Historical Society through the will of one of its members, the late Mildred Lacy Williamson, a grandniece of Alpheus B. Thompson. The Rev. Joseph Thompson, O.F.M. of St. Joseph’s church, Los Angeles, is a grandson of Thompson.

Alpheus Thompson wrote to his mother in Brunswick, Maine, telling her in favorable comments of the early California educational institutions. This letter also is of interest as containing the first mention of a clipper ship to be found in the Thompson papers. Thompson wrote: “I have returned from San Francisco where I have been with my children for the purpose of placing them at good schools in which I have succeeded.

“My three daughters are in the Young Ladies’ Academy, conducted by the Sisters of Notre Dame in the City of San Jose, the two boys are in Santa Clara College, three miles distant from San Jose; both of these institutions cannot be surpassed by any in the Union, and the climate has not its equal in the world. Frank (a nephew) has gone to China on a Clipper Ship.”