

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 14, 1955

'Jones's War'

Another addition to the Early California Travel Series is "Visit to Monterey in 1842" by Dr. R. T. Maxwell and edited by John Haskell Kimble. It is published by Glen Dawson in Los Angeles, designed and printed by Joseph Simon with only 200 copies available at \$10 per copy.

The introduction starts with Commodore Jones's war, the curious episode in which an American Naval force captured Monterey in 1842 when Mexico and the United States were at peace. That story is well known, but the reminiscences of Dr. Richard T. Maxwell, which is now published for the first time, have added valuable details of the capture itself and of the life in California as seen by a young Naval surgeon.

The manuscript of Dr. Maxwell is in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. The handwriting on the original copy has not been identified, nor has the person to whom Dr. Maxwell dictated his account been named.

Dr. Maxwell sailed for the Pacific as an assistant surgeon in the 44-gun frigate *United States*, which had been built in 1797 and was affectionately known as the "Old Wagon" or the "Old States." The Ship was bound for the Pacific on one of the cruising voyages which were the stock in trade of the old Navy. In those days, a sailing ship could remain at sea for a very long time and at no more expense than when swimming at anchor in port, for naval vessels cruised almost constantly.

American warships had been regularly stationed in the Pacific Ocean since 1821. The introduction reminds us that at first the Pacific Squadron consisted of only two or three vessels, but in 1842 when the United States went out as a flagship, there were ships assigned: one frigate, three sloops-of-war, a schooner, and a store ship. The editor explained that often a great deal of single-ship cruising was done, so the voyage of the *United States* was not a usual event, and certainly it was not intended that it should nearly be the cause of a war between Mexico and the United States.

The cruise took on new character when Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, an officer 52 years of age with Naval service going back to 1805, became convinced that bad relations between Mexico and the United States had flared out into war. The commodore

feared that Mexico might cede California to Great Britain rather than allow it to fall into the hands of the United States, so he sailed from Peru to Monterey with all the forces he could assemble and demanded and received the surrender of the quiet little capital of Alta California.

He soon found that he had made a mistake and at once restored the Mexican flag, apologized, and backed out of the situation with as much grace as possible. Although Jones was called to Washington, rebuked for his action, he was not court-martialed. He returned to the Pacific in 1846 when war did break out, with his old post of Commander-in-chief of the Naval forces returned to him.

In 1877, Dr. Maxwell who wrote the narrative of this historic event, was interviewed by a representative of Hubert Howe Bancroft and it is contained in part in Bancroft's *History of the United States*. The events which Maxwell describes had taken place 35 years before, but his memory and notes served him well. He was just 20 years of age when he was commissioned as an assistant surgeon in the United States Navy. His first assignment was to the United States, and his first cruise was the one described in "Visit to Monterey in 1842." He resigned from the Navy in 1851 because of ill health, but returned to San Francisco in 1854 where he made his home for the rest of his life and where he secured a prominent place among the physicians of the city. He was Surgeon and Resident Physician of the United States Marine Hospital on Rincon Point, then the largest hospital in San Francisco.

John Haskell Kimble, the editor also tells the readers that Dr. Maxwell remained a bachelor until June 27, 1883, when he married Nelly Donnelly and that two days later, he died. His funeral was held in Pioneer Hall on July 1, with fellow members of the Society of California Pioneers attending.