

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 11, 1956

Oldtime Army Housekeeping

"Thursday, Nov. 1st, 1849 - Yesterday morning about half past 5 o'clock the steamer came in bringing us the family letter - dated August 16. We all feel very vexed that you should cut short your letters - which was it - scarcity of paper or fear of too much postage for us. If it was the latter, please remember in the future that if each one of you write and send a whole letter in separate envelopes so much the better. For by every steamer the more postage we have to pay and the more letters, the better, we like it and think it a very good steamer."

These are the expressions contained in the letter from Mrs. George Westcott to her Philadelphia relatives in which she described the wedding of her sister, Martha Jeffers, to the Rev. Samuel Hopkins Willey, one of the chaplains at California's Constitutional convention, held in Monterey in 1849, as was the wedding.

She continues her description of Monterey and the family life here as she evidently answers her mother's questions about the house and the furnishings. "Well - Mother was very anxious to know about our furniture, beds, and bedding. We brought out everything we could afford to bring at least raise the money to buy. Our chairs are fancy black walnut, with cane seats (we have a dozen), they were made to take to pieces and pack in a small box, as also a dozen modern ones in the same way, very much like the ones in your kitchen. I have my two little mahogany hair seats, rocking chairs, and card table I had in Buffalo.

"The old dining room carpet we had patched and mended up where the moths had eaten it. Since we moved here, we have a fireplace in the parlor. I sold my cooking stove as we have a nice large one from the Quartermaster and we sent to San Francisco last week for a new carpet. They can be bought there for \$1 a yard, ingrain, \$2 ½ for Brussels. The transportation will be nothing in a QM vessel and I sent for 25 yards to cover our parlor here. The patched one will make our dining room comfortable. The kitchen is floored with boards. It was adobe before and in the other house (the Alvarado), our bedrooms are covered with matting.

It is interesting to note that housewives and ministers, even in 1849, had to improvise sometimes when

household articles were scarce or was it funds. Mrs. Westcott writes: "Mr. Willey and I, one Saturday just after Mrs. Murray left, made a lounge by nailing some boards on some sperm candle boxes. The cushion is made of hay with a little comfort on top and covered with that chintz cover you may remember I had ready-made, so we made the lounge to fit the cover. With my 'tea pots', two lard lamps, bronze candelabras, pretty table covers and pictures, our room is thought to be the most comfortable in Monterey. And it is, except Mrs. Capt. Kane's."

Of her bedroom appearance Mrs. Westcott writes: "I have my walnut French bedstead and dressing glass on that box which was packed in the kitchen in B. with the white muslin tacked round it and toilet cover. Mattie had a toilet table made of half of the big top our crockery was packed in (as large as the one at home). She now has a very nice mahogany dressing bureau. She sent for it by George and he procured the one Lt. Moore brought out, as he lived in a tent. I have a trundle bed for the children."

"Mr. Willey has a very nice bureau also made of the redwood of the country, varnished. My bed ticks are filled with straw - a comfort laid over - and the same bedding I had in Buffalo - my quilts you saw, and my basins and pitchers are beautiful. The washstands Kearney made me of redwood - my castors are very pretty revolving with a broad plain band and cut-glass bottles like yours. As soon as I can raise the money, I intend to have silver forks. I shall not put up the curtains here until the walls are lined. I have made tables out of boxes - with table covers any table looks well enough. "

From the household furniture description, Mrs. Westcott thanks her family for the receipts they sent, but replies; "Wish you in the future to send us the eggs and milk with them as we cannot get either, here-to-fore we have been able to have enough for our coffee but now none for that. Eggs - as a great favor, I have procured a dozen for one shilling a piece, but declined any more at the price."

And so ends the letter describing the trials and tribulations of an army housewife of 1849 in Monterey.